

7

The Great Cleric

White-Collar Survival
in Another World

Broccoli Lion

Illustrator: sime



The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a grand, gothic-style cathedral. In the foreground, a young man with short white hair, wearing a dark purple hooded cloak and blue shoes, is seen from behind as he walks up a wide set of red-carpeted stairs. To his right, a young woman with long, dark blue hair tied in a high ponytail with a red ribbon, wearing a white tunic and a light blue cape, looks back over her shoulder at him. The cathedral's architecture features tall, arched windows and intricate stonework. A large, semi-transparent white 'X' is overlaid on the upper half of the image.

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Chapter 8: A Captain's Pain and the Spirit of Dusk

01 — Church Squabbles

The journey to the Holy City from the Kingdom of Dwarves ended up being more difficult than anticipated. The former slaves who had joined us struggled to keep pace on the way to the highway, and they looked like they might pass out from fatigue at any moment. There was no proper road from the kingdom to the Holy City, so the trek was all the more trying on top of the toll their bodies had endured as slaves. It was only after trudging through a good amount of wilderness and rough terrain that we reached the highway.

Perhaps in the past I would have been more attentive, but it had never occurred to me until recently that I really was fit, my body built, at least somewhat. I had overestimated the others' abilities, partly due to the fact that they had enthusiastically expressed interest in joining the Order of Healing, so surely they had *some* physical prowess, right? Remembering the laps Brod had made me run in the past, I had thought a bit of hiking would be a decent first training exercise.

I shook my head. I was making excuses. I simply hadn't been paying enough attention to them, and the reason for that was the plethora of far greater concerns occupying my mind.

I turned to look at the group, noticed the sweat pouring down their brows and the raggedness of their breaths, and felt a pang of guilt. I brought our march to a halt, instructing them to set up for a break. Relieved sighs rose from the crowd as I walked a little ways away and summoned the carriage from my magic bag. Dhoran hitched the horses with practiced hands while Lionel lingered nearby, his thoughts practically worn on his sleeve.

"Would you call this an indulgence?" I asked him.

"Perhaps," he replied. "But before that I would call it 'unlike you.'"

I tilted my head. "What's not 'like me'?"

“You would normally address them directly. Or at the very least give orders to Ketty or Kefin to do so.”

What he was trying to tell me, although a little more subtly, was that I had been spacing out. And he was right.

“Sorry,” I apologized. “It’s Lihzalea. We never saw her again.”

“The one with the dusk spirit’s power.” Lionel had been there when the others had asked to join the Order. I wondered if maybe that was what he had thought was on my mind. In truth, that was far from my thoughts, since I had placed him in charge of the volunteers, but I kept that to myself. The last thing we needed was to turn this hike into a funeral procession.

“Yeah. Her.”

“She is a worrying factor, given her ability to manipulate memories.”

“That’s part of it,” I said, “but what I’m more concerned about is how out of her control it seemed.”

I had the blessings of the Spirit of Tides and Spirit of Land, myself, but they didn’t come with Lihzalea’s “side effects.” Her very existence foreshadowed the possibility of there being others like her—people who couldn’t control the spirits’ powers. And I kept wondering if maybe there was a way to heal that kind of condition.

“I promise you, the next time we meet...” Lionel gripped the hilt of his sword. Estia, doing her own thing off to the side, shot him a glance with a pale, frightened expression.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I don’t think there’ll be a need for that. If she’s not doing this of her own free will, we can still reason with her. We need to find a way for her to control herself.”

“But you are the only one with the means to resist her power.”

“There’s always Substance X.”

“No, let us take the path of negotiation. Sound judgment,” Lionel suddenly agreed with enthusiasm. He promptly returned to where the former slaves were.

Was boosting our resistances the old-fashioned way such a bad idea?

Estia sighed in relief and turned to speak with Ketty. Those two seemed to be getting along extremely well lately. Something must have closed the distance between them, and I caught Estia relying on her rather often.

But Estia wasn't free from suspicion either. It felt like she was avoiding me. After all this time together, it occurred to me that we'd never had a proper one-on-one discussion. There was always someone else around when I instructed her on Holy Magic, and she spoke with *them* well enough. She was a hard worker, granted. Maybe she was just strict about the chain of command and showing me respect as an S-rank? Or maybe she just plain hated my guts.

Regardless, she got along with the others, and the pope had sent her to me for a reason, so I hoped she would stick around. I really didn't want to deal with another shipment of healers who might be a little more obvious about their disdain for me.

I wrapped up our short break before I had time to think myself into a hole.

The road this time was properly maintained and well-traveled. I could only assume this, as I was on horseback, but it seemed much easier for the rest of the party to travel on. Good thing too; this way, we could pick up the pace.

Or so I had foolishly thought.

The ex-slaves were moving even slower. The break only seemed to have worsened their exhaustion, and they trudged onward with long, heavy steps. I realized this was not a problem of physical stamina. If it was, it would have been easily solved with a cast of Heal. This was a problem of will, plain and simple.

Panicked and short on options, I requested that Dhoran make another carriage for them, which he did very quickly and easily. But what he could not craft with ease were the horses to draw them. Lionel's warhorse and my own equally stubborn steed, Forêt Noire, refused to be relegated to that positively *abhorrent* task.

I had to wonder what in the world they had expected the Order of Healing to

be like. True, one wouldn't normally anticipate rigorous exercise from a regiment of healers, but surely they weren't blind. They saw Lionel, Ketty, Kefin, the people I traveled with. Heck, the four actual healers among them were doing better than the others.

But then, a bit farther along, the healers also fell into the same exhausted march, and it didn't take a genius to figure out that they had run out of magic to cast Heal on themselves with. That was less surprising, though. Jord and the old members of the Order had already shown me just how out of shape most healers were, which only impressed upon me that having Brod train me had been the right decision...despite the nicknames it had earned me.

We plodded along with me casting Area Heal on them periodically, but they were quickly reaching their physical limits and were forced to take increasingly frequent breaks. On the bright side, it made it easy to decide whether or not they belonged in the Order. But I began to worry that we'd end up with casualties before even making it to the Holy City, so I instructed Lionel to stop treating them like adventurers and to regard them as regular citizens. He agreed, if grudgingly.

Eventually, it got to the point where even the horses were starting to grow frustrated with the stragglers, and they huffed and whipped their heads at the former slaves. But they quickly stopped as they realized the futility of the effort. The group was too tired to even notice.

Ketty and Kefin stayed near them at all times, and when the ex-slaves saw how they sparred and trained throughout the breaks, talk of joining the Order quickly died out.

Despite all this, as an S-rank healer, I couldn't simply abandon them. I could only pray that the next town would have horses for sale and that something, anything would happen along the way to cure our awful boredom. Maybe, just maybe, saddling myself with fifteen strangers on such a long trip hadn't been the best idea.

We couldn't make it to town that night. The moment I announced that we'd be making camp, the weaker half of the company collapsed on the spot. I did

feel bad for pushing them so hard and planned to make dinner that night a good one.

“They’re faring worse than expected,” Lionel told me in private. “You surely see that too, sir. The wrong spectator might assume you were preparing them to join the military.”

I shrugged. “We have a potential solution, but we don’t have any horses for the carriage, and no way to run ahead and buy some.”

Kefin raised his hand. “I can do it, sir.”

“I appreciate the enthusiasm, but Shurule’s not very kind to beastfolk,” I said. “At least not right now.”

“Oh. I see.”

His eagerness died immediately. I simply wanted to avoid as much unneeded danger as possible.

“Please tell me if there’s anything else you need me to do.”

“I will. Thanks,” I said.

“Shall we go together?” Lionel suggested.

“I’m sure we could,” I said, “but I’m worried about how things would go without me, so I don’t think we should. I’m sure we’ll reach the town soon enough, so let’s just hold out until then.”

It would have been easy to send Lionel on his own, but I had no desire to be caught unawares without him around (again).

“Very well,” he acquiesced. “What do you say I whip them into shape a little?”

“Into shape? Yeah, they’re weak, but it’s not like anyone was whining or complaining.”

“I’m concerned about their prospects for making a living once we reach the Holy City.”

Adventuring was certainly the most readily available option of employment for the former slaves—the healers aside—and they wouldn’t make it as they were now. If they knew any other trades, I hadn’t heard about it when they’d

offered to join the Order. At any rate, they were in Lionel's hands now.

"Do what you think is best," I said. "I'm going to talk with the healers after dinner."

"Yes, sir."

He moved off towards the group, shouting orders to get camp set up. With so many hands, it was taken care of in a flash, and after dinner had been scarfed down, they promptly passed out like robots who'd run out of batteries. Except for the healers I had pulled aside first, that is.

"I know you all want to sleep, but I need to ask you something," I said. "It won't take long."

The four bowed politely.

"So, if I remember correctly, Merido and Hanz, you two are from Luburk, right? Naratt and Norman, you're from Illumasia?"

They blinked, likely surprised that I remembered their names, and answered my question with smiles. Remembering names was the fastest way to earn favor. It was Business 101, although it was admittedly funny how something so trivial could be so impactful. As a totally unrelated side note, I had to remember to thank Kefin later for writing their names down for me.

"I'm not sure if any of you know this, but I was in Yenice until recently," I told them. "So I'm a little lacking when it comes to information on other countries. I want you all to help me with that."

Merido raised his hand and spoke for the others. "I don't know how much we can tell you. What exactly do you want to know, sir?"

"How about the public opinion of healers?" I asked. "I want to hear how the new guidelines and pricing structures are going over in Luburk and the empire."

I knew I was a particularly hated individual among many healers, but our job wasn't held in as high esteem in other places as it was in Shurule, so the new rules probably weren't quite so shocking to the healers there.

"In that case, I can tell you about Luburk."

"And I can teach you of Illumasia," said Norman.

“Thanks. Let’s get started.”

The night went on, and I listened intently, punctuating their accounts with the occasional question.

The next morning, dark clouds had rolled in and warned of coming rain. I let everyone know we’d be moving faster today, and the former slaves, surprisingly, seemed more than ready.

Lionel noticed my confusion and said with a sneer, “I simply showed them the way of discipline.”

“Show them in a manner that won’t traumatize them, please.”

“Of course, sir.”

They were nothing like the day before. I hadn’t been allowed to use Substance X, so I couldn’t imagine what Lionel might have done to change their attitudes so quickly and completely.

Not long after setting out, a small village conveniently came into view just as drops began to fall from the sky.

“Please let them have horses,” I muttered.

Lionel did a poor job of hiding his smirk. “Yes. Let them have horses.”

As I racked my brain over what was so amusing, I remembered I hadn’t sent a herald to notify them of our arrival.

“Estia, Kefin, can you two ride ahead?” I asked.

“Yes, sir,” Kefin replied.

“Sure,” said Estia.

We had only found this town by chance. Hopefully, they would have information on other settlements in the area.

As we approached, I saw the villagers gathering at the gates. Lionel and Dhoran noticed shortly after, and the dwarf slowed the carriage.

“What shall we do, sir?” Lionel asked. “We may scare them if we try to enter with so many people.”

“We’ll keep going,” I said. “As long as we’re careful, we can show them we mean no harm.”

And so we did, advancing cautiously.

When we came to the village, Kefin and Estia looked uncertain. I dismounted Forêt and greeted the townsfolk. “Hello. I’m the leader of this company, Luciel. We’re heading to the Holy City and looking for shelter from the rain.”

A middle-aged man emerged from the crowd and said, “Your friends told us you were an S-rank healer. Is that true? How can we trust you?”

“I may be young,” I replied, “but I can assure you I’m an S-rank. If I’m to believe Her Holiness’s decrees, anyway.”

There was a moment of silence, filled only with a skeptical glare that was less than comfortable. Lionel, Kefin, and Ketty—who was sitting in the carriage—didn’t help matters by making themselves look extra intimidating.

“Did something happen to make you so distrusting?” I asked.

“As a matter of fact, yes. A group showed up not too long ago, just like yours, only smaller, and they claimed to be healers too.”

“Were they not?”

“They were,” the man said. “But the second they finished healing, they started demanding payment. Money we didn’t have. So they took off with our horses.”

“In that case, I can understand your caution. Can you describe these individuals? I promise they’ll be punished accordingly.”

A police force of some kind would have helped with situations like this, but I had never heard of any in the larger cities, much less a village as small as this.

“Of course, but I have to ask again,” the man insisted. “Your armor doesn’t exactly impress upon me the image of the S-rank healer you claim to be.”

“Fair point,” I said. “*Area High Heal.*”

The magic circle expanded and enveloped the people in a pale light.

“M-My shoulder,” he stammered. “The pain’s gone. And in my back too. I-I apologize, sir.”

I shook my head. “It’s okay, really. Now that you believe me, may we enter your village? I’d like to get indoors before it starts to pour.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir. Right this way, um, sir.”

The mayor first directed us to his house, but I suggested the empty stable instead. With over twenty people, I figured that would offer more room for our party.

“*Purification*. That should make it a little more pleasant,” I announced. “Everyone wait here for a bit. Ketty and Estia, stay with them.”

At the mayor’s house, I interviewed him about the other healers and got extremely familiar answers. Hating me was rather commonplace among healers these days, but based on the description of their appearances, there was no doubt in my mind that the offenders were the three who had joined me with Estia. And the men accompanying them were likely mercenaries or some other rogues from one unsavory guild or another.

My head started to pound. Still, it was better than freaking out over an unknown threat.

“Thank you for the information. We’ll handle them,” I said. “Also, if I can be direct, does your village have any remaining horses? And if so, would you be willing to sell them?”

“To...you?” the mayor asked.

“Yes. Like I said at the gate, we’re heading to the Holy City. And we’re in a hurry.”

“Well.” The mayor’s face stiffened. “How much would you offer?”

“However much you want, really, but I was thinking three times their market value,” I replied.

“Three times,” he repeated. “*Three* times?”

“Three times.”

The mayor nodded repeatedly. We appeared to have struck a deal. I offered him the money before he could change his mind, purchasing six in total.

Once that was done, I asked Dhoran to prepare the carriages, and Pola immediately summoned a golem to help with the building process, using the leftover lumber from the school construction project in Yenice. They got to work immediately.

The townsfolk stood in the rain and watched the performance, utter shock clear on their faces throughout the process, and although Dhoran kept his poker face tight, the rest of the team and I could tell the attention was making him flustered. Pola endured it less gracefully and soon hid inside one of the carriages.

Meanwhile, I designated Kefin the driver of one and assigned the former slaves Mappulo and Jabrone to the others. The latter two had experience, thankfully.

Afterwards, the mayor invited us to lunch, which we gratefully accepted. By the time the carriages were done, the rain had stopped. We thanked the people for their hospitality and were on our way once more.

The extra carriages sped things along significantly. In just a week, the outer walls of the Holy City of Shurule could be seen in the distance. The sight was an incredible relief.

“Mister Luciel,” Lionel said, “I think we should proceed on foot from here.”

“Why? I don’t see any problem with how we are now.”

“For a normal convoy, there wouldn’t be an issue. But you are an S-rank healer. Normally, you would be escorted by knights.”

“Okay, but this is still a convoy,” I argued, “in which case it would be weirder for you to be on foot, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, but we are not knights. We are slaves,” Lionel said. “And the city likely knows it. You would cause a stir by placing us on horseback, even as escorts.”

“A stir, huh?”

I didn't much like those. And there were the factions within the Church to consider. But I was unaffiliated—or rather, I suppose I fell with the Loyalists given my relationship with the pope. I would be causing trouble for her as well as myself.

All of a sudden, I understood what Lionel was hinting at. I had to consider my position. Ultimately, I gratefully accepted his suggestion, and we housed the horses, except for Forêt, in the stable inside the hermit key. The former slaves, along with Lionel and the team, proceeded on foot.

"Welcome home, Saint Weirido," the guard at the gate greeted me.

Oh yeah. That's my nickname here, I remembered. I replied with a vague smile mixed with a twinge of nostalgia and a splash of regret.

"Thank you," I said. "Has anything changed since last year?"

"Nothing in particular. Things have been quiet, sir."

"I see. Thank you again."

"Oh," the guard said, "the Valkyrie Paladin Regiment funded the establishment of a restaurant in the slums. They've been holding regular food distributions there."

"The Valkyries?" That was unexpected.

"Yes, Sir Weirido. And the residents have been maintaining community hygiene, just as you instructed them. The slums have improved greatly."

"Hmm."

The restaurant he'd mentioned was probably where Sagius and his men had set up shop. Lumina, on the other hand, had clearly been busy, and I was glad to hear that my simple little charity cleanup had encouraged the people to keep their city clean.

I could hear more about Sagius from Lumina later, so for now I chose to deal with the ex-slaves by taking them to the Adventurer's Guild.

The Holy City was as alive as I had left it. I rode through the well-maintained streets astride Forêt Noire as onlookers called out to me.

“Welcome back, Saint Weirdo!”

“Looking forward to that holiday o’ yours again!”

“Need more food? I got you covered like always!”

I couldn’t help but smile.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself,” Lionel noted.

“Since when does attention make the boss happy?” Ketty asked.

“Can you blame me? I’m feeling sentimental,” I said. “This is just about the only place I’ve never had someone try to assassinate me. I worked an honest job and I got out what I put in. It was nice.”

Barring that time I had gotten stabbed, of course, but to be fair, I had been pretty full of myself back then. Nothing could come as close to home as the Merratoni Adventurer’s Guild, though.

“Why are they all calling you Saint Weirdo?” Kefin asked.

“Let’s keep our questions to ourselves,” I said. “Anyway, wouldn’t you know it, the guild’s just around the corner.”

We came to the front of the Adventurer’s Guild, where I dismounted Forêt, patted her neck, and left her in the care of the ex-slave healers. Not that anyone in this city would have been dumb enough to not know my special steed or unwise enough to try anything with her. There would be hell to pay—if Forêt herself didn’t get to them first.

I led the former slaves into the guildhall. It was packed with adventurers, presumably done with work for the day, and many were people I recognized. They acknowledged me with a few words upon noticing my return but kept from crowding around. And that was a good thing too, because it hadn’t crossed my mind, but coming here with so many people would have normally set off alarm bells.

I raised a hand and smiled in reply as I made my way to the reception desk.

“Welcome,” said the woman behind it. “How can I help you?”

“I’d like to register these people with the guild,” I explained. “They don’t have many physical skills but can use magic. Could an exception of some kind be made?”

“Let’s see if they qualify for registration first,” the woman answered nervously. “The guildmaster will have to see to any exceptions.”

I didn’t recognize her. She might have been hired before getting the chance to learn about me.

“Right. Whatever you need to do. Is Grantz in now?”

“My colleague is going to check on him, but the dining hall is awfully busy at this time. Would you mind waiting a moment?”

The dining hall? Hello? Was that where the guildmaster’s office was these days?

“Not at all,” I said. “In the meantime, can you see about qualifying them?”

“Of course. This way, ladies and gentlemen.”

The receptionist began to offer the usual explanations about adventuring and registration. The very same explanation I had intelligently ignored during my own registration, so maybe I could learn a thing or two as well. But just then, Grantz appeared.

“Been a while, Luciel,” he said.

“It has,” I replied.

“Plannin’ on raidin’ the guildhall with all them folk?”

“It’s a long story, and I couldn’t take them to HQ, so I came here first.”

“Visiting us adventurers before the Church, eh? You sure haven’t changed.”

I smiled. “Some things never do.”

Grantz seemed the same as usual too. Even if his opinion of me was as twisted as always.

“You been cooking?” he asked.

“Not much lately, but I finally got my hands on the skill.”

He grunted. "So, what brings ya here today? Heard you found yourself on the council at Yenice, but when'd you get back to Shurule?"

"My term ended, so I thought I'd show my face back home," I said. "It wasn't a fun year. I learned a lot of lessons in futility."

"Well, no one knows everything. Not even old guildmasters. Mirlina and Milty handle all the day-to-day stuff. Now who're these folks? Friends o' yours?"

"That's right. I mean, aside from the people I'm registering. I met them in Yenice, and they're my trusted companions."

"Those are good to have. Keep 'em close," Grantz said. "And I bet you brought all those other fellas for a reason. We'll take them in."

"You're sure?" Not that I was complaining but that was a little *too* generous.

"We keep in touch with the Church a lot more these days. They even drop a few jobs here every now and then. Consider this a bit of a favor. Can't go wrong knowing an S-rank who owes ya one, eh? Plus, you're not just dumpin' 'em and leavin', are you?"

I suddenly got what he was saying. It would work out in Grantz's favor if I offered this as an official request from the Church. He wouldn't have specifically dropped so much information otherwise.

"I'll be here for a few days, so I'll pop in every once in a while, of course," I said. "And I'll be going back and forth between here and Merratoni for a while. I could even introduce them to my master if they need a little training."

Grantz chuckled. "In that case, we'll take 'em off your hands."

"I appreciate it. Here's money for their room and board for a month."

I held out a platinum piece.

"Runnin' a charity business now?"

"I was only able to do so much here in the Holy City because I had people in Merratoni who treated me well. I wouldn't be where I am without them. So I'm just paying it forward."

"You're a good guy. Don't let anyone go and take advantage o' that."

“Good thing I couldn’t care less about what people do as long as no one’s getting killed.”

“Very true.”

“Anyway, they’re yours,” I said. “Oh, and fair warning, they’ve got basically no stamina.”

“Kept that to yourself, didja?”

I introduced the ex-slaves to Grantz, then had them promise to do their best to build lives for themselves and told them to rely on the guildmaster if they ever needed him. With that, we bid them farewell...or at least, that was the plan.

“Mister Luciel, would you be willing to sell us a carriage?” Mappulo asked out of nowhere.

I didn’t have any issues with the proposal, but I also didn’t understand it.

“I think I’ve already done what I promised for you all,” I said.

“We want to get into trade,” said Jabrone.

“Trade?”

“Mappulo and I want to deal in horse carriages.”

“Remember how few we saw on the way here?” the other remarked. “I think we could make a real business out of it.”

I paused to think. They were certainly right about the lack of wagons that had passed us on the road. Carriages weren’t a very necessary convenience for everyday life, but they were a convenience nonetheless, especially for those who had to travel regularly.

A transportation business. Now that was an interesting idea. But merchants needed to account for guards and other expenses. If it really was as lucrative as it seemed, someone probably would have beaten us to the punch. Then again, I had learned my lesson about making assumptions.

“Don’t expect me to sell our work short. One of those carriages is worth a lot,” I said. “If you still want to give it a shot, put together a business plan and

I'll look it over when I come back."

The two men broke into big smiles and thanked me. They definitely had the enthusiasm down.

I thanked Grantz again, and then we were off.

*

Elsewhere, Catherine had received word that Luciel was back in the city along with another cause for concern for her already troubled mind: one of his followers, Lionel, the Illumasian general known as the Lion of War. She had seen the Lion in action only once during a tour early in her career. He was a demon on the battlefield, carving his way through entire forces like a one-man army. That single glimpse had been enough to instill a fear of fighting in her for some time after.

Catherine had heard reports of the general's excellent skill as a leader, and she was at the same time anxious about what he might think of the Knights of Shurule and hopeful that his presence could be the hammer she needed to finally straighten them out.

"An S-rank healer and the strongest man in the empire. What a duo," Catherine murmured. "I could really use some of that weirdness of yours for myself, Luciel."

No one was around to answer her. She sent for someone to notify the Valkyries to make ready for future mock battles.

*

"The adventurers certainly like you," Lionel remarked as we left the guildhall.

"The guildmaster taught me everything I know about cooking," I replied with a smile. "And I've had a lot of give and take with the local adventurers."

On the way to Church Headquarters, I let Ketty and Kefin know where the local inns and lodgings could be found just in case. The current political climate wasn't exactly friendly to beastfolk. Better to have backups for any eventuality.

We came to the entrance of Church HQ.

"It's good to be back," I murmured.

The others looked up at the imposing building with nervous expressions as we entered. Estia had met the pope before, so I didn't expect a reaction from her, but she glanced around the interior curiously. Two receptionists I recognized were at the front desk, and I casually greeted them.

"Can you call Catherine or Granhart, please?" I asked.

"Of course. One moment." The two ladies took their arclink crystals and closed their eyes. I waited for their telepathic conversations to end, mildly surprised that they had two of the devices. "It will just be a moment, Mister Luciel. Lady Catherine and Sir Granhart will be with you shortly."

I hesitated a little, thinking how weird it would be to give souvenirs to receptionists, but ultimately settled on the side of polite courtesy and handed them some honey candy. There wasn't any harm in being kind to people you worked with.

"For us?" one asked.

"Mister Luciel, you're too kind."

"Let me know what you think," I said. "We're always looking for more creative ideas for how to use honey back in Yenice."

The two thanked me, popped the candies into their mouths, and broke into smiles. What was it about this world that seemed to make sweets such a rarity? Clearly, the Valkyries weren't the only ones with a hankering and no way to sate it. Making a honey factory had been a smart move. Way to go, me.

I was listening to the receptionists' thoughts when Catherine and Granhart arrived. Catherine quickly rested her sword hand on her weapon's hilt. I ignored the gesture and greeted them.

"Long time no see. S-rank Luciel, reporting to Headquarters."

Catherine removed her hand from her weapon. "Welcome back," she said. "Now, I'd love to linger on the pleasantries, but I have to ask if you have any idea who you're standing next to."

Who I was standing next to? I turned to my side. Yup, just Lionel. I had already reported to Her Holiness about him, so Catherine should have known.

“These people are technically slaves, but really, I’m willing to free them of that whenever they like,” I said, “so I consider them my companions. Is there a problem?”

“Then you *do* know,” Catherine said. “You know that he’s the Lion of War.”

“Yes, I’m aware. But I haven’t introduced them yet. Oh, before that, these are the healers from the Kingdom of Dwarves that I told Her Holiness about.”

Catherine sighed heavily. “Luciel.”

“Don’t look at me like that. I know he’s a former Illumasian general, the Lion of War. I bought him from a slaver by sheer chance.”

“Yes, and I’ve heard rumors about that very same general still being in action elsewhere. What is he doing here?”

I was certain beyond a doubt that this Lionel was the real deal. I struggled for a moment to work out how to answer her question, then said, “This is the real Lionel. I’m positive. So whatever you heard must either be stories or the empire found themselves a doppelganger. I’ve seen him in action, protecting me from just about everything this past year.” Plus, the empire’s Lionel might have had a reason to borrow his title, but *our* Lionel had absolutely none. What would he have stood to gain by faking such an identity? “Also,” I continued, “before you ask, no, I’m not an Illumasian shadow agent.”

“Of course not,” Catherine said. “You’re not nearly that clever.”

I had to look at things from her point of view. Shurule was no stranger to the occasional skirmish with the empire, and even if Catherine had never fought Lionel herself, she very well may have seen him on the battlefield. In which case, of course she’d be a little uncomfortable with my choice of friends.

As I was rethinking my decision to bring them here with me, Granhart interjected, “Pardon me for speaking out of turn, Mister Luciel, but may we turn our attention to the healers behind you?”

“Granhart,” Catherine muttered.

“My apologies. I simply saw no end to this discussion and acted in the name of expedience,” Granhart said. “I’d like to ask them a few questions, sir.”

“What do you need them for?” I asked.

“Not here. We’re crowding the lobby. I’d like to hear what those four have to say, if you don’t mind.”

I was never going to get used to Granhart speaking to me so formally. It was terrifying.

“All right, everyone go with him. Also, take this.” I handed him a letter detailing the information I had gathered about the rogue healers. He accepted it with a deep, respectful nod, then disappeared with the healers into the magic elevator.

“So, have you and Lionel met?” I asked Catherine.

“Not exactly,” she replied. “I’ve seen his work from afar. A few times. He was unrivaled on horseback and gouged the enemy with his spear like a true lion of the battlefield.”

“So I’ve heard.”

But was that really enough to justify her distrust?

“To me, it was my duty,” Lionel remarked. “To others, it was murder. It’s understandable, sir.”

“I mean, you like fighting, testing yourself against strong opponents,” I said. “Have I done something wrong by bringing slaves to Headquarters, Catherine?”

“No. I’m sorry. It’s personal,” she confessed. “You’ve already given Her Holiness plenty of notice. Just remember that as slaves, they’re technically considered your property, so you’ll be held responsible for their actions.”

“But the Republic of Saint Shurule doesn’t recognize slavery as a legitimate institution, right?”

“Right. So they’ll be treated as equals. As your followers, essentially. Meaning, like I said, you’ll also be punished if they cause any trouble. Just be careful.”

I honestly didn’t see how her problems with him were personal when it sounded like she was more worried about me than anything else. She always had been a bit awkward. It was oddly comforting.

“What’re you smiling at?” she asked.

“Nothing.” I laughed. “Oh, these two are beastpeople. Will there be any issues with the factions?”

“Human supremacy is on the rise, but you won’t find Headquarters endorsing any of that behavior, so I think you’re safe here.”

“That’s good. Anyway, in that case, can you take us to Her Holiness?”

“I was going to get to that,” she said.

“Sorry, it’s just been so long, I think I’d get lost on my way there,” I replied with a laugh, trying to lighten the mood a little.

“And here I thought you knew what you were doing.”

I laughed in response again.

“All right. I can’t say if your friends will be allowed in, but let’s get going.”

“Lead the way.”

02 — Luciel's Request

Every knight and healer we passed on the way to the pope's chambers stopped and bowed before me. Well, not to *me*, I knew. To my rank. I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to it.

Catherine knocked on the door. "It's Catherine. I've come with Mister Luciel."

Before I could feel uncomfortable about her calling me "mister," the pope replied, "Enter."

Her regal and dignified voice rang out clearly through the door, and Catherine opened it.

"Excuse us," Catherine said.

I followed her in, Lionel and the others trailing wordlessly behind us. The hall was exactly as it was the last time I had been there. Her Holiness sat behind a veil, her face hidden from view. We approached her before taking a reverent knee, then waited for her to speak.

"It's good to see you again, Luciel," she said. "I can't express how grateful I am for everything you've done not just for Shurule, but for Yenice as well."

"Your words are wasted on me, Your Holiness," I replied. "I would have been lost in the chaos without my companions behind me."

Was it just me or did the pope sound different?

"Humble as ever," she said.

Never mind. Was it because Lionel and the others were with me?

"I believe your success in rebuilding the Yenice Healer's Guild is deserving of a reward," she continued. "State your prize."

I had only come to report to her as a formality. Now it looked like I'd come for the reward. Still, the request came easily. I had already had one in mind since my meeting with Lord Reinstar.

"In that case, I would like to visit the City in the Sky, Neldahl."

“To what end?” Her Holiness asked.

“It concerns the labyrinths,” I answered.

I couldn’t speak about it with so many other people around, and not without looking into just how possible my theory about learning new magic types without their affinities was. And I couldn’t exactly drop the news that I’d met the pope’s father then and there. Perhaps in the future when next we met.

“It may take time,” she said, “but if that is your wish...”

“It is, Your Holiness. I’m fully aware that it can’t be granted immediately. There is no rush. All I ask is that preparations begin, if at all possible.”

“Rest assured I will send word when all is made ready.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness.”

She breathed a short hum in acknowledgment. “Now, on to other matters.”

“Such as?” I asked.

“The labyrinths.”

“The labyrinths, Your Holiness?”

“I heard news of a dungeon in Yenice suddenly regaining life and birthing powerful monsters.”

“Correct. I ascertained as much myself,” I said.

“And all was made well again when you conquered it, yes?” she asked.

“Yes, Your Holiness.”

“I see. And where will your travels take you next?”

This conversation was all over the place. I wasn’t going to have to call someone via arclink crystal tonight to figure out what was going on, was I?

“I’m thinking we’ll take some time to rest, return to Merratoni, and re-establish the fundamentals of my training.”

“Ah. To meet with your mentor in the martial arts.”

“Right,” I said. “Once our break is over, we’ll travel back to the Kingdom of Dwarves to retrieve weapons and armor for my companions, and from there

we'll make for Neldahl, if possible. If not, then Grandol will be our next destination."

"Very well," the pope said. "Should you set out for Neldahl, you may do so from the Holy City itself."

"You mean it can be reached from other places?"

"From every capital in the world. However, much like the advancement of one's class, it requires a special touch and permission."

"Oh, speaking of class advancement, my job level reached ten recently. Am I able to be promoted?"

"Well done, Luciel!" The pope's voice lit up. "None but you could leap such distances in so short a time. All others, leave us."

Catherine and the ladies in waiting exited at once with obedient bows, followed by Lionel and the rest of my team after quick nods in my direction.

Once the door shut, the pope descended from her throne and paced over to me. She was beautiful, her age somewhat ambiguous with features that appeared too defined for a child yet too gentle for an adult. Ever so subtly, she resembled her father, Lord Reinstar.



“You grace me with your presence, Your Holiness,” I said. “I leave myself in your capable hands.”

“You have grown in the year you have been gone. I see it in your eyes,” she said. Wait, did she just ignore me? “Words truly can not capture the gratitude I feel to you for your actions in Yenice and protecting Rockford.”

The pope didn’t reveal her face often, if ever, so I had tried to be exceptionally respectful, but she’d just breezed right past it. She hadn’t even blinked. Maybe she heard flattery enough in her day-to-day life.

“I couldn’t let my friend’s home fall apart,” I said, smiling wryly. “How does the process work? Do you need anything from me?”

“Nothing, save your decision once I list your possible classes,” she replied.

“Will I still be able to use healing magic afterwards?”

“That will depend on the class you become. You may even become weaker, but you are not obligated to decide at this very moment. Calm yourself, S-rank.”

I felt the tension leave my shoulders. “That’s good to hear. Carry on.”

“Sit, close your eyes, and be still,” she instructed.

I did so, crossing my legs on the floor before her, and waited. She placed her hand on my head and began to murmur a chant too quietly to make out the words.

About a minute later, she said, “Open your eyes.”

“Did you see anything?” I asked. “What are my options?”

She was silent for a moment. “Only one. Spirit knight. I think it best that we postpone your promotion for the time being.”

It sounded like a rather rare job to me. So why did she seem so disappointed?

“Would becoming a spirit knight cause me to lose my holy magic?” I asked.

“There is no holy element among the spirits, so yes,” she answered. “It’s a shame. I truly expected to see the sage class among your options.”

“Well, I’d rather keep my healing magic, so I’m okay with staying as I am.”

“Perhaps it’s some effect of the spirits’ blessings,” the pope mused. “I’ve heard stories of a past sage somehow earning his class automatically. Something must trigger it.”

Something like freeing all the dragons and receiving every spirit’s blessing? But in order to pull that off, I’d need a little more than luck. The thought of losing my magic wasn’t one I had ever entertained, and I didn’t like it. I needed to consider countermeasures.

“If Merratoni is where you will be, pray return here at least once each month,” the pope said. “I will inform you of my progress with Neldahl.”

“Yes, Your Holiness,” I replied. “One other thing, about the four healers Granhart should currently be questioning: I think they are connected to Illumasian slavers. We’ll require your assistance if hard evidence reveals itself.”

“Very well. Exercise caution.”

“Of course. I intend to continue to strive for a peaceful life where I can mind my own business and pass away from old age.”

“It truly does pain me, the weight I’ve burdened you with. Do not hesitate to seek me out whenever you need me.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness. I plan to avoid causing problems on a national scale moving forward, but I will remember your offer.”

“By all means,” she said proudly. “Really, it only makes matters worse that we’ve received no end of petitions, requesting that you speak, teach, or even attend functions with those from upper society. Balls, dinners, it’s simply endless.”

“Upper society?”

“You’ve made quite the name for yourself this year.”

“Hmm, you know, I don’t think I’m very interested in getting involved with political intrigue. No thank you.”

“Fame comes at a cost,” she stated. “It’s only a matter of time before betrothals begin finding their way to you.”

“Okay, I’m a little interested in that,” I admitted.

“You will not be for long. You would do well to bear in mind how exhausting diplomatic affairs can be. I owe much to Muneller for taking the reins in that field.”

“Yes...Your Holiness.”

Muneller had been integral in drafting the healing guidelines, and although he had the face of a shady peddler, he was a shrewd politician and served the pope well as her right hand. I had to remember to pay him a courtesy visit as well.

“There’s just one last thing,” I said. “It’s about the healer you endorsed. Estia.”

“Ah, the one with the spirit’s blessing, or rather, patronage, I should say.”

“Patronage?” I parroted, puzzled. “Estia? We’re talking about Estia, right, Your Holiness?”

“Were you not aware?” she asked, genuinely surprised. “Estia is not only blessed but favored by the Spirit of Dusk.”

“She’s *what*?!”

In that moment, I very nearly felt my soul leave my body.

“You ought to learn the specifics from her yourself. She has a troubled past, that one, having fallen victim to a healer. She was taken to the empire, and that is where she chanced upon the spirit.”

No doubt the pope had powerful appraisal and observational skills, so there was no way she wouldn’t be able to notice something as obvious as a spirit’s blessing. There was just one problem—Lihzalea.

“Poor girl,” Her Holiness sighed. “But she has the spirits. Do what you can for her.”

“I’ll talk with her,” I said. “Does she have any family? A sister, maybe?”

“Any she had, including her parents, have left this world.”

“I see.”

I thought of Lihzalea’s past and how similar it was starting to sound to Estia’s. Suspiciously so. Now that I thought about it, the two had never even met. Could

Estia or the Spirit of Dusk have had something to do with why Lihzalea disappeared from the Kingdom of Dwarves? A lot of things would make sense if that were the case.

“Say, Your Holiness,” I said, “do you like candy?”

“Is the sky blue?”

“Then I think you’ll like this.”

I handed her a jar of the candy I had been passing out.

“Could this be...”

“It is. Honey candy,” I said.

“I knew it!” she cheered. There was no hiding the joy on her face.

“I’m glad you like it. I expect to receive more regularly, so I’ll have some sent here as well.”

“You are indeed a loyal servant.”

“I owe you a lot, after all. I will take my leave then, Your Holiness.”

“Of course. Dismissed.”

We exchanged smiles, and I extended my hand out of habit. Her Holiness looked taken aback for a moment before accepting it with a playful grin. Her hand was smaller than expected. I didn’t linger long, for fear of being rude, and exited her chamber with a polite bow.

The door shut behind me, and I heaved a sigh. My body sagged with the stress that was only just now hitting me. So much was buzzing in my head that I still needed to sort through when I noticed someone out of the corner of my eye.

“Catherine?” I said. “What are you still doing here?”

She was giving Lionel a strange, almost imploring look.

“Mister Luciel,” Lionel answered instead, “what do you say to a sparring match with the knights?”

What? Since when was that a thing? Catherine had probably asked him, and I didn’t want to deny her, but the captain of the guard versus the former

Illumasian general? How had it come to this so quickly?

I ended up agreeing, struck by the sheer sincerity in Catherine's gaze. I couldn't bring myself not to. But I put forward the condition that the match be stopped if anyone was in any real danger. No one was dying on my watch, even if the only way to ensure that was to not have a mock battle at all.

03 — The Mock Battle

Estia's situation still weighed heavy on my mind, but not so much as to overshadow how nice it was to see Catherine again. We chatted and caught up as we made our way through the maze of hallways, soon coming to the Valkyries' personal training grounds.

"I should've known," I said.

Catherine smirked. "I think my girls will be good judges of your friends—and how much you've improved, don't you?"

Apparently, I was also joining the match. I searched Catherine's expression for a way out and found none. But I wasn't going to just sit back and take this. After everything I'd been through, I would not surrender now.

"It's getting late and we need to find where we're going to stay for the night," I protested. "Can we do this some other day?"

"Look at the spine on you. We can do this as many days as you want. And don't worry, we'll make sure your people have a place to sleep, slave or not, dwarf, beastfolk, or human."

Classic. How nostalgic.

I sobbed bitter tears in my heart and surrendered.

The Valkyries were awaiting us in rigid formation. Catherine had been prepared.

"How long have they been waiting like this for us?" I asked.

"You only have yourself to blame for bringing Illumasia's greatest general along with you," Catherine stated with a hard smile. It was probably the first time I had ever seen her grin so effortlessly.

I turned to Lumina, and she bowed. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Mister Luciel. May we all fight well today."

Our ranks had totally reversed, and perhaps her respect was due to my

team's presence, but I had to set the record straight.

"Lumina, all of you, this isn't a public forum. Treat me like you always have," I said. "It gives me the creeps seeing you act so formally with me."

"I assure you, it's purely respectful and not at all motivated by a desire for more honey," Lumina insisted.

"We were going to beat you up if you tried to pull rank, to be honest," Lucy laughed.

Things only deteriorated from there.

"Have you gotten stronger?" Ripnear asked.

"I hope you've studied," Elizabeth warned me. "Ripnear and I shall test you thoroughly on the rudiments of dual-wielding."

"Wait, we will?" Ripnear replied.

"But of course."

Fortunately, they didn't seem to be in sync. I had not studied up on my dual-wielding.

Two claps cut through the clamor. "I know we're all dying to reminisce, but we're killing daylight, girls," called Catherine. "Let's begin."

The Valkyries immediately stood at attention. Come to think of it, I hadn't ever actually seen them fight at their best. I couldn't let my guard down.

"So, how do you think we should divide the groups?" Catherine asked.

"Hmm, well, assuming magic is allowed, I'd say four of us versus the rest of you would be fairly well balanced."

The regiment looked utterly offended.

"Are you calling us weak?" Lumina said accusingly.

"Of course not. I'd lose to any one of you on my own, but my companions are better than you give them credit for, and they're very well equipped. We also have to consider how our combat styles will mesh."

Catherine flashed me a thorny grin. "Eleven against four. If that's what you

want, Mister Healer. Give my girls a good show. Anything goes as long as you don't maim anyone. Just try not to lose *your* head either."

Clearly, the Valkyries weren't the only ones I had insulted.

"You misunderstand," I said. "I meant to include you. So it's *twelve* against four."

I thought that would make them even madder, and I was right, but it really was the most balanced composition. Catherine should have known how strong Lionel was, so either her head had inflated over the years or she was being reckless. And they must have forgotten how powerful my barrier magic was as well. With that alone, victory was very much within our grasp.

Lionel and Ketty looked completely unperturbed by the matchup, only adding to my confidence. I chose them for my team, as well as Kefin, sending the R&D team to the sidelines with Estia. I wasn't sure I trusted Pola to know how to keep her golem from turning someone into a pancake.

"We've got this, Kefin," I said.

"Yes, sir," he replied.

"What weapons will we be using?" I asked Catherine.

"You still know how to heal, I assume," she said. "As long as it's not too serious, anyway."

"If they're not dead, I can heal them. You want to use live blades?"

"The more realistic the better, don't you think?"

I turned to Lionel. He nodded.

"All right," I agreed. "But anyone who takes a solid blow has to retire."

"Fair."

"When do we start?"

"First, everyone begin in the center and take thirty paces."

We gathered in the middle of the field and waited for the captain of the guard's signal. It came and the match began.

I immediately free cast Area Barrier, Lionel swiftly taking position in front of me while Ketty and Kefin dispatched themselves to harass the enemy. Five of the Valkyries intercepted them, and the remaining ladies charged at me and Lionel.

“Defend or attack?” Lionel asked.

“We don’t know how hard they can hit, so let’s wait and see what they can dish out,” I said. “We could end it with your flame sword, but we’re not trying to kill them.”

“Understood.”

The Valkyries finished setting up, and Lumina, Saran, Myla, Beatrice, and Kathy attacked Lionel from all around. Lionel took a single step back, swung out his shield and greatsword, and repelled their attacks at once. Attempting to strike at the break in his guard, Lumina rebounded and thrust in her sword. I cast Heal at the same instant and renewed Lionel’s Area Barrier, then turned my attention to Ketty and Kefin and applied the same spells to them.

Lumina’s cohort retreated, surprised by how quickly we had recovered from the charge. I was casting healing magic continuously, meaning our stamina was virtually infinite. All they had to do to win was take me out of the running, but Lionel made that nearly impossible. No speed could outrun him, and no attack could break the shield he impeccably guarded me with. Our partnership of trust was impenetrable, and our opponents’ morale visibly dropped.

Ketty parried blows, never initiating herself but slowly chipping away at the enemy with well-timed counters. The Valkyries were losing, little by little. Kefin utilized his ninjutsu expertly and lured the paladins around the field, disappearing and reappearing like fog and inciting friendly fire. Any attack that seemed to connect with him only struck the air as he vanished, providing Ketty precious seconds to land an attack.

Eventually, we figured our opponents out, fell into a rhythm, and the match gained momentum in our favor. Kefin countered Saran, knocking her to the ground, and Elizabeth set her sights on me. She had to do something, so she circled around and ambushed me from behind.

“This might not be fair, now that I think about it. But oh well,” I muttered.

I transformed the Illusion Staff into sword mode and filled it with magic, at the same time summoning a shield from the magic bag in my free hand. I patiently waited for Elizabeth's and Saran's attacks, then parried them with my sword when they finally came. Their weapons were instantly split in two. While they blinked in confusion, I kicked Elizabeth back and swung my shield into Saran, knocking them both away. They were out of the match.

They had been caught by surprise, but a loss was a loss. I refocused myself, careful not to get overzealous.

Without Elizabeth to check him, although scraped and bruised here and there, Kefin used his ninjutsu to go on the offensive. Ketty was unscathed and led Ripnear, Marluka, and Lucy around by the nose, letting more of their blood run at every opportunity.

"Lionel, do we hold things until the match ends or should we add to the offensive?" I asked.

"Do you think you can begin to take them out of the battle?" he replied.

"We can find out."

Lionel took a blow from Kathy, pushing her closer to me. Queena appeared to protect her wounded comrade as I faced them down.

"That sword's seriously not fair," Kathy whined. "Please don't break my weapon. It's *really* expensive."

I cracked a smile. "You could always surrender. Join Elizabeth and Saran."

"Fine," Queena said flatly. "We yield. Your weapon is too strong."

I felt a bit of shameless pride at finally beating them. Meanwhile, Ketty and Kefin were pressing their advantage against the wounded Valkyries. One by one, they surrendered, leaving Lumina alone.

"Your defense is impregnable," Lumina exhaled. "It's absurd."

The captain struck out with a desperate flurry of her most powerful attacks, and Lionel lazily repelled each and every blow.

"Mister Luciel's barrier magic is certainly something, isn't it?" he remarked idly.

“I always knew that, but he’s improved leaps and bounds. To an *absurd* degree.”

“It’s why I follow him.”

Lumina dodged a swipe of Lionel’s blade.

“However,” he continued, “I would regard my surroundings more carefully if I were you.”

Lumina swung at Lionel’s neck but suddenly stopped. No, *was* stopped. Kefin and Ketty had caught her unaware, each of their blades crossed over her neck, locking her arms in place. She exhaled, the frustration she felt evident.

“You chose your companions well, Luciel. Indeed, you were right to be confident. I admit our arrogance.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Then if the match is over, I’ll get everyone healed.”

“Please do.”

“Catherine?” I said.

“Yes.” She smiled and nodded. “The match goes to your team.”

I went about treating everyone with Area High Heal, wondering if “team” was really the best thing to be calling ourselves.

I let out a heavy sigh of relief that the battle was over and our duties for the day were complete. But it was never that easy.

“Looks like you’ve leveled up a fair bit,” Catherine commented. “Why don’t you spar with me, and we’ll see how much you’ve *really* improved.”

“What? No.”

“Come on, now,” she insisted. “We’ve all seen how strong your weapon is, but not you personally. How else are we supposed to know if you need a guard detail?”

“Why would the knights be guarding me?” I demanded.

“One can never be too sure.”

“I’m at least a little sure that you just want to get back at me for the match.”

“All right, let’s see your war face.”

With that, Catherine came down with a sudden case of deafness and refused to hear any more of my pleas. The Valkyries joined in as well, effectively sealing all avenues of escape.

Some time later, after promising a rematch at a later date, I was finally spared.

“Am I going soft?” I wondered aloud. “Have I forgotten how to tell people no?”

No one bothered to answer me. Lionel was busy talking with Catherine, and Ketty and Kefin chatted with the others freely, no one seeming to be bothered by things like race in the slightest. The Valkyries all but lost their minds when they saw Pola and Lycian’s golem off to the side of the field.

I looked at them and grudgingly let my personal misgivings go. At that moment, I was blissfully unaware of the mess this single friendly bout would cause.

04 — Shadow

We all gathered in the dining hall. In the kitchen was a familiar face: my very first date, Rosa. She was bustling about.

“Good evening, Rosa,” I greeted her.

She looked up, surprised at first, then smiled. “Well, if it isn’t Mister Luciel. I didn’t know you were back.”

“Only for a little while,” I said. “I see it’s as quiet as always around here.”

“I wish we’d see a few more smiling faces, but no one wants to sit down and enjoy their meal these days.”

“Guess that makes me special. I’ll take an extra-large helping as usual, please.”

“Coming right up. Hang tight.”

Rosa disappeared into the kitchen. Then, I heard Catherine’s voice behind me.

“Still friends, hm?”

“Is that so strange?” I asked. “We may have to follow rank and procedure, but that doesn’t change the fact that we’re all people who deserve respect. Especially people who work on the service side of things. Plus, it’s just nice to be nice, you know? Whether we’re working or eating, we’re all living, so might as well make it a good time.”

Catherine and Lumina smiled back at me. I looked at my teammates, who were laughing and talking with each other in good spirits. It made me happy.



It was technically the second time we had all been together, counting the matter with Sagius, but I was glad they got along. We hadn't caught a single whiff of the human supremacists either. Maybe we'd get to relax for once.

I heard the girls mention that they hadn't gotten many opportunities to chat the last time they had met, so they were going all out now.

"Here you are, dear," Rosa said, emerging once again. "There's plenty where that came from if you're still hungry."

I thanked her with a smile, took my food, and walked to the table where everyone else sat. Catherine and Lumina sat across from me with the others a small but respectful distance away. The girls unreservedly took up seats around my team despite the beating they had received minutes earlier. Lionel and the others answered their endless questions with hints of exhausted politeness.

"It's only been a little more than a year, but it feels so nice to be back in the Holy City," I said.

"I heard you enjoyed a good deal of freedom in Yenice," Lumina noted. "At least, in regard to your honey exploits."

I could sense a ravenous hunger for sweets emanating from her. It gave me devious ideas and ample fuel to tease her with, though I had given her quite a bit of honey already. Had it not been enough? I made a mental note to supplement her supplies later.

"To be honest, I only had that freedom because people who were more qualified picked up the slack," I confessed. "It wasn't so easy at first."

"People," Catherine repeated, looking at my team. "You do have a habit of drawing them to you."

Lumina looked straight at me and said, "Personally, I think he's earned their loyalty."

I fidgeted under her gaze. "Thanks," I said. "Not to change the subject, but how have things been since the guidelines went into effect? I want to hear your opinions."

"I don't leave Headquarters, but according to reports, clinics aren't happy,"

Catherine said. “Mostly healers in Shurule.”

“I see.”

Then the rotten bunch of healers I’d received hadn’t been lying. The farther you went from the Holy City, the more clinics were closing their doors. But healers in other countries didn’t enjoy the special treatment those in Shurule did, and their clinics were supposedly thriving with more patients than ever. The situation here was the result of a system built to allow predators to leech off unearned authority. And I was the one who had finally pulled the plug on it.

When the system came crashing down, droves of corrupt healers no doubt rushed to shut down their businesses before the Knights could come and convict them. That must have been why most of the closures were far from the capital. Man, I probably had a lot of enemies out there.

“Don’t let it get you down,” said Catherine. “I’ve heard talk of a new generation of healers inspired by you. They’ve been training just like you did, all day, every day, until their magic runs completely dry. Our average skill levels are higher than ever.”

“That’s good, at least.”

“We’ve seen our share of hostility towards the guidelines while on our tours,” Lumina remarked, “but they’re old healers set in their ways. We’ve received even more thanks from average citizens, and crime has plummeted in towns with guild branches.”

“Crime?” I asked. “How?” I didn’t recall reforming society.

“When the prices of healing are fair, people can plan for eventualities, and they feel less afraid,” Lumina explained. “Particularly adventurers. Oftentimes, those in their occupation resort to muggings and robbery to earn coin for fear of the danger traditional adventuring brings. When there is less risk, tensions do not run so high. Or so my healer acquaintance tells me.”

“Good.” I exhaled. “It seems like the guidelines are doing better than I thought. I didn’t know what I’d do if things were looking bad. Her Holiness never kept me updated about that, so I’ve been on the edge of my seat this whole time.” I brought a bite of food to my mouth.

“Her Holiness, the archbishops, and I have a clear picture of the situation. Don’t be so anxious,” Catherine said. “You know, another thing I heard was how you were drowning in deskwork back in Yenice. But I see you never slacked on your training.”

“You can never be too prepared,” I stated. “Also, my friends there like their sparring. They’d kill me before they let me skip a day of training.”

Catherine’s face hardened. “About that. I think it’s time you told us exactly how a former Illumasian general ended up joining you. How does the empire’s strongest soldier become a slave?”

Was it just me or was Lionel something of an idol to Catherine? Was it admiration or caution towards an enemy military leader? I thought they had been informed of the situation, but perhaps they were lacking the details. Or perhaps she only asked for the sake of filling in the others with us.

“I’m sure you read the report, but I found them being sold at a slaver’s shop,” I said. “That much is true, as is why I bought them. I just thought they might be of some use if I could heal their injuries. I think I told you all this, right, Lumina?”

“Yes,” she answered. “I told Lady Catherine as well, I believe.”

Had Catherine thought she was mistaken? No, that was impossible. She had surely heard it from Her Holiness too. So was this interrogation just to inform everyone else? There were rumors, after all, and rumors had a tendency to be exaggerated. Whatever Catherine’s opinion of Lionel, it was obvious that she had placed him on a pedestal.

“You two don’t understand,” Catherine murmured. “You never saw him on the battlefield. He earned his title for a reason. He was a hero. *Their* hero, at least. It would not be hyperbole to say that Illumasia swallowed up its neighboring countries so quickly solely because of the Lion. Do you see what I’m saying, Luciel? Do you understand—*really* understand—what that means?”

Catherine was certainly our senior on the matter, but I just couldn’t imagine Lionel in the role of hero, although he might have fit the picture of a demon who fed on despair for some. As long as you weren’t the enemy, anyway. I didn’t know what I would do against him in our matches without healing magic.

I'd always known Lionel was a marvel, but hearing a friend speak about his feats, the lion-like ferocity with which he fought, made it feel more real.

"As hard as it might be to believe," I said, "everyone with me, other than Estia, was enslaved when I found them. Lionel couldn't even walk. So while I *do* understand he has a complicated past, right now he's my most trusted follower."

"That just makes it even more unbelievable. Lionel? An invalid?"

Her reaction was understandable for someone who had seen him in action before, and you wouldn't have known it to look at him now. But it seemed that what Catherine was interested in was *how* he had become a slave, though she likely wouldn't have been convinced if we simply told her he'd been betrayed. And I wasn't going to force Lionel to tell her anything.

"What piques my curiosity," Lumina interjected, "is why you sought to purchase slaves the moment you arrived in Yenice. I thought your Order was sufficient."

"I remember the report saying it was because the guild was in the slums," Catherine said. "And you were in danger. Is that right?"

It felt like I was being subjected to a military tribunal. Would it have killed them to talk a little more casually?

"Things were rockier than expected," I explained. "After one of the representatives tried to take my head off the moment we arrived, I decided we needed more security...which was a wise decision, if I do say so myself."

"You mean to say the situation devolved quickly," said Lumina.

"It was only a matter of time, really. I couldn't have the Order on watch around the clock without overworking them, and I needed a personal bodyguard."

I was doing a lot of explaining, but better to set the record straight about just how much I had gone through. Especially for anyone who happened to be eavesdropping. Strangely, the looks of the knights and healers who were staring at me felt more pointed than before.

“How did you decide who to choose?” Lumina asked.

I stopped glancing around and returned to the conversation. “I spoke with anyone who didn’t flinch at me and bought the ones who expressed an interest in joining me.”

“I know that much, but how did you gain their trust?” Catherine asked.

“Luckily, I was able to heal them, and once they were in fighting condition again, they agreed to defend me,” I answered.

“Luck,” Catherine echoed. “Yeah, that was some luck, all right.”

Lumina frowned, her expression somewhat pained. “Indeed, slaves are only people. A simple fact, but one easily forgotten.”

“Right,” I agreed. “I didn’t buy them to be slaves but to be my comrades, and I treat them as such.”

According to Lionel, I indulged people rather than treating them as anything in particular, but Catherine and Lumina didn’t need to hear about that.

“So, now that you’ve been out of the country, do you see why Shurule is where all the healers are?” Catherine asked.

“I learned firsthand that Shurulian healers are spoiled, that’s for sure. It really was good luck that Merratoni was the first city I visited and that Lumina was there to meet me. I don’t even want to think about what might have happened if I had started my career in Yenice. Hopefully things there will start cooling down, though, and it’ll become more like Merratoni. It’s nice to see change.”

Lumina hummed and Catherine chuckled.

“About the mock battle tomorrow,” the captain of the guard said, “would your followers be willing to hold one-on-one duels?”

I didn’t like this swift and sudden turn our conversation had taken. Was she testing our capabilities? Certainly a solid judgment, given her position.

“Lionel, Ketty, Kefin, are you up for it?” I asked.

“If you wish it, sir,” Lionel said. “Personally, I would relish a prelude to my rematch with the Whirlwind.”

None of the others protested either. Ketty and Kefin simply nodded, and it was decided, but not before I noticed a twinkle in Catherine's and Lumina's eyes. Our victory today had lit a fire in them, so it seemed we'd be staying at the Church for a few more days.

Dhoran and the other crafters abstained from the fighting, instead choosing to conduct some market research—a prospect that sounded very appealing to me over the alternative. They weren't slaves anymore, so as long as they were willing to continue making useful things for us, I was happy.

"Oh," I said, "I mentioned this in the letter I gave to Granhart, but on the way from the Kingdom of Dwarves, we heard reports of a band of healers who forced magic on some townsfolk, then stole their horses."

"Luciel," Catherine sighed, "you tell me this *now*?"

"Er, I thought it was Granhart's field," I said. "And you kind of made a dramatic entrance, so I sort of just went with the flow."

"Oh, Luciel," she sighed again. "Somehow, I'm glad that you're still such a ditz. The knights are currently cracking down on corrupt healers. Progress is slow but moving."

"I had no idea. In that case, I'll detail it in another report and send it to you."

"Please do."

"Speaking of criminals," Lumina said, "I had something I wanted to talk to you about regarding the bandits you ran into."

She was probably referring to Sagius, albeit in a roundabout way. I told her I would stop by her quarters after delivering the report to Catherine.

"We don't have a new room prepared for you yet," said Catherine. "Should I send someone to handle that?"

"Don't worry about it," I replied. "We'll only be here for a few days at most, so my old quarters will work fine."

"I thought you'd say that."

I laughed. She certainly got me. I wouldn't know what to do with some great big room, and she knew that darn well.

Some time later, we finished dinner. I returned to my quarters, and Lionel and the others retired to theirs. My room was exactly as I'd left it, which in itself was a pretty bold and thoughtful gesture. I had to learn how to pull off that kind of courtesy myself. Not that it would amount to much in this case, since I wouldn't be using my room for much at all.

I set to work on my report for Catherine, including details about the changes caused by the guidelines that I noted, and went to deliver it. After hammering out some details regarding the mock battles for the following day, I left her room and started heading towards Lumina's.

Upon entering, I took note of how little it had changed, mostly on account of how little there was *to* change. It was very simple, or more politely, very functional. What little furniture there was seemed to have been crafted with extreme care. I had failed to notice it during my first visit—I had been too nervous—and I silently chuckled at my past self.

Lumina poured us some tea, and we sipped it together.

"So," I began, "by 'bandits' I assume you mean Sagius's men?"

"Correct."

"Could this be about the charity restaurant in the slums I heard the Valkyries funded?"

"You know about that?" she asked.

"The guard at the gate told me. I have absolutely no problem with it, of course. I left them in your hands, after all."

The one thing I was worried about was that Lumina would be the one to assume responsibility if anything happened.

"Thank you," she said.

"But I do want to ask, if you don't mind, why you took such an interest in Sagius and his men."

"He's..." Lumina thought for a moment. "I am part of the reason Sagius fell to brigandage. I'd like to leave it at that."

There was something sad in her expression that kept me from pressing her

further. “I understand. Thank you for telling me,” I said. “Now, surely you have no problem with me paying them a visit sometime?”

“Of course not.”

For the first time, I felt like I had caught a glimpse of Lumina’s past, and what I saw wasn’t the strong woman she was now. She wasn’t always this way. She had grown into it.

I thanked her for the tea and excused myself. It had gotten awfully late, and I was getting antsy, but as I started to head towards the Labyrinth of Trials to clear my thoughts, I remembered that I hadn’t taken Forêt Noire out of the hermit key. I wanted to have Yanbath look after her and the other horses while we were here, so I took a detour to the Valkyries’ training grounds.

Digging through my memories, I walked through the labyrinthian halls. As I came up to the paladins’ field, I spied Estia. What was she doing here?

Actually, this could have been my chance to confirm what Her Holiness had told me. I desperately didn’t want answers to many of my questions, but at some point I would need them, so I tailed her.

She never went to the Valkyries’ grounds, but rather entered the stables through the official entrance that I never even knew existed.

“What’s she doing there?” I muttered. “Is she looking for Forêt?”

I had seen her having what looked like conversations with the horse before, but Forêt, of course, was still in the hermit key.

I followed her. Thinking positively, she was just a horse girl, but knowing the truth about her relationship with the Spirit of Dusk made me suspicious.

I opened the door and squinted through the darkness. The magic lanterns provided minimal yet serviceable lighting. Pacing forward, I found Estia peeking into each of the stalls, presumably looking for a horse, if not Forêt specifically. Yanbath and the other stablehands were nowhere to be seen.

Questions flitted through my mind; then, Estia sagged her shoulders and let out a disappointed breath before turning back my way. I threw myself into the nearest open stall I could find.

Wait, why was I hiding?

Estia left the stables before I could answer that most recent puzzle. I took a quick look around the building before going after her and found all the horses in a deep sleep.

“Did Estia do this? With the Spirit of Dusk’s power, maybe,” I mused. “Well, at least they look relaxed.”

What reason could she have for putting a bunch of horses to sleep? Then, I found Yanbath and two stablehands unconscious.

“Was this Estia too?”

I cast Recover and nudged Yanbath awake.

“Wha...” he yawned. “Oh. Well, hello there, Luciel.”

“Good evening, Yanbath. Napping on the job?”

“Napping?” he asked. “Me?”

“Still half-asleep?”

“Shoot! Boys! Wake up, boys!” Yanbath shook the stablehands awake and went to check on the horses.

Had Estia put them to sleep or was it the spirit? I had to investigate further, find out if she was acting intentionally or not, and report to the pope. Her Holiness hadn’t mentioned anything about Lihzalea even though I had spoken about her via arclink crystal, so I had to make sure to bring her up next time.

The worries occupying my mind sapped any motivation I had to visit the labyrinth, so I said goodbye to Yanbath and returned to my room. What awaited me at my door made me stop in my tracks.

“Estia?”

“Oh, Mister Luciel,” she said.

“Good evening,” I replied. “Can I help you?”

She seemed to think something over, then said, “I have a favor to ask. I want to see the horse again.”

“You mean Forêt Noire, I assume.”

“Yes. The black steed you ride.” She bowed her head.

“A proper reason might convince me,” I said.

She stuttered for a moment. Whatever it was, she clearly didn’t trust me enough to say, but I stood my ground.

“I’ll be clear. I don’t fully trust you right now.”

Her head jerked up, genuine shock on her face. If it was an act, it was either a damn good one or I was a bad judge of character. Hopefully the former.

“I’d be glad to explain why,” I went on, “but it would be more accurate to say it’s the Spirit of Dusk I don’t trust, not you specifically.” Fear joined the surprise in her expression. I ignored it. “There’s something I never told you about. You see, in the Kingdom of Dwarves, we met a girl. A girl who claimed to wield the Spirit of Dusk’s power.”

“What?” she finally said.

“She could manipulate people’s memories and completely hide her presence. She seemed to excel in covert operations.”

“Manipulate memories? But that’s...” Her reaction was all the proof I needed to know that she shared the same ability.

“The truth is, I heard a little about why the pope endorses you. And a little about your past. It matched this other girl’s story to an unsettling degree.”

“How is that...” She hesitated.

“I also saw you at the stables earlier,” I continued. “Whatever you gave Yanbath and the horses was pretty strong stuff. So you see why I’m a little torn over what to make of you.”

Whether or not the spirit was helping Estia in some way, if it was using her with malicious intentions, something had to be done. Whether Estia was complicit in that would drastically change the measures that needed to be taken as well. And the only one who *could* do anything was the one person she couldn’t affect: me.

In either case, she was the Order of Healing's responsibility. I readied myself to deliver my judgment when an uncharacteristic sigh from Estia stopped me in my tracks.

"Listen, Luciel," something using her voice said. "That is your name, isn't it? What will it take for you to let me see my sister? My blessing?"

"What?" I blurted. "Who are you?! You're not Estia!"

"Need I spell it out? I never have trusted you humans, but here I am. I want to see my sister. You control the means to make that possible, so I'm speaking to you through Estia." The entity added an edge to Estia's voice that had never been there before.

"I, uh, wasn't aware spirits could possess people's bodies," I said. "Is that safe? For Estia, I mean."

"You worry for her. You are not as stupid as you look." A second voice overlapped Estia's and she began to speak with an ominous echo. "I am quite fond of Estia. I would not put her in harm's way."

"What are you after?" I asked. "Who is your sister? And to what end, exactly, are you using your powers in this way?"

"You ask too many questions," the two voices said at once. "Estia is in no danger. She is shy, so I placed the men on the way to the stables into a slumber. No one was hurt."

"This might come as a surprise to you spirits, but we mortals call knocking people out a crime. You really don't see how that could potentially be bad for her?"

"Yes, yes, you've made your point. I apologize. I only want to see my sister." The spirit inside Estia lowered her head.

Witnessing such a proud entity humble itself took me aback for a moment. But it was overshadowed by my disbelief at who the spirit claimed was her sister.

"Let me get this straight," I said. "Your sister is Forêt Noire?"

"Yes," the voices replied. "I implore you."

I free cast Sanctuary Circle, Dispel, and Recover on Estia in quick succession. Just in case.

The spirit cracked a smug grin. "Testing me for evil? You are a cautious one."

"Hm," I said. "Nope, doesn't work."

"People are quick to correlate darkness with the wicked, but alas, I am not."

"So it would seem."

"May I see my sister now?"

"This is probably pointless, but can you swear not to cause any harm to Forêt?" I asked.

"You think I would do such a thing to my own kin?" she replied with a hint of human-like offense. "I swear."

I took her word, took out the hermit key, and opened the door right in the middle of the hallway.

"You'll have to settle for this. If she doesn't want to come out, then—" Before I could finish my thought, Forêt barreled out of the door and into Estia. "Whoa, girl! Easy! Don't take it out on her body."

I rubbed and patted her neck until she settled down. Estia groaned in her usual voice, but it was unclear if she was back in control. If she wasn't, Forêt would probably get upset again, so I continued to soothe her as I cast Heal on Estia.

She shook her head as if refusing to switch back. She looked exhausted. A black aura glowed around her body, followed by a white aura around Forêt, and the two went still. Staring at one another. I could only assume it was some kind of communication.

Forêt had never reacted so violently to Estia in the past. Maybe she had been throwing a tantrum over her supposed sister outing her identity. With no other options, I simply watched the lights in silence until the glowing auras faded back into their bodies.

"Thank you," said the spirit inside Estia. "Take care of Estia, and when my powers have returned, I may offer their aid."

“Wait, I need to hear about Lihzalea!” I exclaimed.

“I’ve never given my blessing to such a girl. It’s likely she was a victim of cruel experimentation. Offering her any salvation will be difficult.”

She left no room for argument, and a moment later, Estia collapsed into me like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Forêt trotted back into the hermit key’s stable.

“Can I just have one break?” I groaned.

I pulled Estia up onto my back, many expletives regarding the current situation running through my head. There were a lot of suspicious things going on, and I remembered it was Granhart’s job to look into such matters, so I decided to bring her to his office. But when I got there he was busy, so I grudgingly asked where her quarters were and trudged to her room.

Once Estia was in bed, I recalled the spirit saying it had put everyone *on the way* to the stables to sleep. I followed the route myself and found no less than twenty Church members conked out on the floor. After waking them up, I went back to my room, locked away the day’s events deep in the back of my brain, and passed out the moment my head hit the angel’s pillow.

*

Catherine was not afforded a restful slumber. The Church’s strongest, the Valkyries, had lost to Luciel. That wasn’t to say the healer wasn’t formidable in his own right—he certainly led a respectable team consisting of some of the world’s strongest fighters—but she could make excuses all day. They had lost, even with a great advantage in numbers.

The Knights of Shurule were weak. That was the lesson their captain had learned that day. That was why she had challenged the healer to a duel. She had to gauge his skill herself, accurately, and the result had given her the same answer: the Knights of Shurule were weak.

They had to be stronger. Catherine hoped the next mock battle would be the first step towards that goal.

“It’s not levels or stats that Luciel has over them,” she muttered to herself. “It’s experience. They have to see that with this match. They have to.”

The Knights were lacking something, and Catherine spent much of the night worrying herself mad over the solution.

05 — Coming Battle

I awoke feeling well-rested and nostalgic for my old room. It was a little earlier than usual, and the sun had yet to rise.

“Old habits...” I muttered. “That business with Forêt and the spirit probably didn’t help.”

I stretched, just like I used to, and considered the upcoming sparring match. Yesterday’s exercise had shown the Valkyries how much my stats had improved since our past training sessions, at least when it came to Elizabeth and Saran. Catherine and Lumina were on a whole other level, though. I wouldn’t be able to overpower them.

I decided the matter of Forêt and Estia would be best addressed later. Then I realized it might have been possible to speak to the former through the Spirit of Dusk and ask if she preferred staying with Yanbath. And just like that, I had overturned my own decision and ended up spending my whole morning thinking about the two.

I gave myself a light slap on the cheeks to focus, then headed for the Valkyries’ training grounds. By the time I arrived, the sun had begun to lighten the sky.

“Good morning, Catherine,” I said in greeting. “You’re here early.”

“Morning, Luciel,” she replied. “It’s not every day you get to spar with the Lion.”

The captain had an uncharacteristically innocent look in her eyes. Lionel was a frightening person but clearly an idol to her nonetheless. He was definitely popular. I probably should have warned her that as far as I could tell, he and Nalia were already an item.

“He’s strong,” I said.

“It’s exciting. We can test the limits of our abilities without a fight to the death. Say, why don’t we have a little warm-up? I need to do something with all this energy.”

I take it back. She was just itching for a fight. Why was every single strong fighter a battle-crazed lunatic? I guess it stood to reason that people who enjoyed testing their skills against powerful opponents would naturally improve.

“Sure, as long as you promise to go easy on me.”

“Of course. And feel free to use that special weapon of yours.”

“I can’t guarantee it won’t break your sword,” I reminded her.

“Oh, I know.”

She was confident. Well, there was no harm in using her as a stand-in instructor for now.

“All right, then here I come.”

I dove in and quickly struck close with the Illusion Sword, trying to catch her off guard.

“Fast,” Catherine remarked. “But is that all you can do?”

I had charged with all the speed I could, boosted by the Physical Enhancement skill, but still she had dodged my blade by a hair’s breadth.

“I’m just getting started.”

I took out the Holy Dragon spear, switching to my old and faithful sword-and-spear technique, and let loose a barrage of attacks. I had grown through my training, and I wielded the spear, one-handed, with confidence, thrusting smoothly and without breaking form.

“You’ve grown, I’ll give you that,” she noted. “You might even give the others a good show. Except for Lumina, that is.”

“I appreciate the flattery, but I’m still out of my league here,” I admitted. “I’m no captain of the guard, after all.”

“Maybe. I’m sure your teammates can fight this well, can’t they?”

“If they’re going easy on me,” I muttered. She knew firsthand they were even stronger than that. Of course, Catherine was still formidable on her own. “The way you’re acting makes me think you’re the strongest person in the Church. Is

there anyone who can beat you?”

“There used to be,” she said, her eyes distant. “People you would aspire to beat. Nowadays, I constantly have to watch myself. Hold back.” Her expression softened into a smile. “So I really am glad you’ve brought some people who can push us to give it our all.”

The Labyrinth of Trials had really placed a heavy burden on her over the years. But still, she had founded the Valkyries. I thought that was worth being proud of.

“Let’s resume, shall we?” I asked, moving to attack. “One day, I’ll build an army so powerful, you’ll never be lacking for rivals again.”

“Excluding yourself, I see.”

“Hey, a support class is a support class.”

I pivoted and thrust my spear out, an opening Catherine did not let pass. She slammed her heel into my chest with a high kick, knocking the wind out of me. I managed to keep my balance, but not before she had placed the tip of her blade at my throat.

“All right,” I panted, “you win.”

“Not bad,” she commented, “but sloppy. Maybe you’ll tighten up your technique with experience. Or maybe it’s your reliance on healing magic.”

I swallowed. True, my ability to heal certainly allowed me to fight more recklessly than I normally would, but was it really still causing me to get sloppy? I thought I’d gotten somewhat stronger, but against Catherine, I was just taking meaningless damage. God forbid I ever lost my magic.

My master would have my head if I showed up to fight him like this. He’d resort to calling me “kid” again.

“How do I get stronger?” I asked.

“Well, you have a guard detail, so you’re pretty safe, all things considered,” Catherine replied. “If you’re ever on the front line, I’d say you need to keep your style at seventy-to-thirty offense-to-defense. Otherwise, you’ll only be subjecting yourself to needless injury.”

“Seventy-thirty,” I repeated. “Can we have a rematch?”

“Hungry today, eh? All right, I’ll bite.” She settled back into her combat stance with a small grin.

I promptly proceeded to lose ten matches in a row before it was time for breakfast.

“When did it get so late?” I mumbled.

Suddenly noticing my surroundings, I realized the Valkyries had been watching us.

“Nice job hanging in there, Luciel.”

“That’s our battle-crazed healer.”

“Didn’t think you’d last that long.”

The audience’s commentary was definitely something I had been missing in my more recent training sessions.

We left for the dining hall together, and on the way I made sure to vehemently address the allegations that I was “battle-crazed.” At the entrance to the dining hall, Lionel, Estia, and the rest were waiting for me.

“Good morning, everyone. Did you sleep well?” I asked.

“While not particularly pleasantly, I did sleep,” Lionel answered.

“Got a good forty winks,” Ketty said.

Kefin’s expression hardened. “Not so much for me. I’m not used to beds being, er, soft.” Life in Yenice was the likely reason for that preference.

“I suggest you learn to adapt,” Lionel told him. “We can’t have you exhausted in the field because the *bed* wasn’t to your liking.”

“I’m seriously considering the floor as a viable alternative,” Kefin responded.

“Let’s maybe start making our sleeping arrangements a little less firm,” I suggested.

“I’ll get on that,” Dhoran said.

“I’ll help,” offered Pola.

“Now, we’ll be needing some magic stones—” Lycian began.

I gave her a sarcastic smile. “No you won’t.”

And yet I ended up handing them over anyway. A magic stone excursion into the labyrinth soon seemed to be in order.

“Mister Luciel,” Estia said, her eyes fixed on the floor, “I apologize for last night.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied. “Are you feeling better?”

Smooth. We could talk normally.

“Yes. I...”

“Let’s talk more later. What are your plans today?” I asked.

“I need to speak with someone,” she said. “I can regroup with you all when I’m finished.”

“Got it.”

“Luciel,” Catherine cut in, “you do know she’s with Her Holiness, right?”

“You know about Estia?” I asked.

“She’s a rare one. Arcanist sword fighters always are. They suspected she would be useful to you because Lord Reinstar could manipulate the spirits back in his day.”

Shoot, I’d forgotten to tell my team about her class. I shouldn’t have spoken so carelessly in front of them. Oops. Maybe they wouldn’t take the information so badly. I wasn’t sure exactly how they felt about the spirits.

The pope was a mixed human and high elf (a high half-elf?), and her father was none other than Lord Reinstar. If her father could commune with the spirits, no wonder she could.

“Let’s just have breakfast,” I suggested. We entered the dining hall. “Morning, Rosa,” I greeted the server.

“And good morning to you,” she replied.

“I’m thinking about getting some new clothes for my companions. Would you

mind showing me to that store again? Annie, I think the owner's name was."

"You mean Anna? I don't think you need me for that," she said. "Unless you've forgotten the way."

"No, not at all," I said, maintaining a polite smile. The companions in question behind me could not pick their own clothes to save their lives. "I just don't want my fashion choices to be the next thing under scrutiny."

I didn't need much, since I could use purification magic, which negated the need to change all that often. But I was in the public eye, and I had to pay attention to appearances.

"O-Okay, I understand!" Rosa said, flustered. "Lift your head now, dear."

I glanced up at her, then did as she asked. "I'll let you know when I end up needing your help."

"As long as there's no more bowing involved. Really, now."

I laughed. "I'll try to remember. Anyway, an extra-large helping, please."

"You're turning my hair white faster than age. Just a minute." She disappeared into the kitchen with a sigh.

"I didn't know you had an interest in fashion," said Lumina mildly.

"Eh, no more than any other guy," I said. "I just thought we might need extra clothes for when we travel, and I have people who can magically enchant them if needed."

"Do you..." Lumina seemed to pick her words. "You know of Blanche, yes?"

"The country east of Yenice?" I'd heard from Galba that it was a hotbed of human supremacy. There were a lot of rumors about the place, none of them good.

"Should you find yourself there—and only if you have the chance, really—would you check on the state of the government for me?"

"Sure thing, if we ever go."

I didn't bother to ask why Lumina was acting so strange. Luckily, Rosa appeared with my food before we could fall into an awkward silence. I thanked

her and found a seat.

The meal was lively with talk of the day's coming battles, and Lumina's expression brightened once again, but her somber mood from earlier hadn't escaped my notice.

Afterwards, Estia went her own way, and the rest of us entered the training grounds.

06 — Illumasia, Demons, and Humanity

We were just getting ready to warm up at the Valkyries' training grounds, when Catherine stopped me.

"We're holding today's battle on the joint field," she said with a smile, pointing towards the field in question.

My bad-feeling-senses immediately tingled.

"That's a little big for how many people we have, don't you think?" I replied. "Is this not enough room?"

"It's great for individual or group sparring, but you know," Catherine said, "it might do you good to get some experience with leading troops on a larger scale."

"I am literally never going to do that in my life."

Not if I could help it, anyway. Leading an army against an enemy force was logistically no different from bringing a sword down on a man's neck. I had already let people die in Yenice and the Kingdom of Dwarves. Never again. And I was at my limit commanding such a small group as it was. Even assuming Lionel took the lead instead of me, I didn't see the point in this sort of exercise. My bad feeling had hit the mark.

"I knew you wouldn't like it," Catherine sighed. "Still, the paladins and templars are itching to get some practice under a former general. It seems word about Lionel has started to spread."

"Okay, but that doesn't mean we have to indulge them," I argued. "Training in small groups so I can be ready against bandits is one thing, but when am I ever going to be fighting against legions of knights? I guess I'll give them credit for being motivated, at least."

I hadn't expected Catherine to come clean about her motives so easily. Still, I couldn't see the point of me doing something on such a huge scale.

"There's nothing I can do to convince you?"

“I’m sorry but I’m not budging. I told you, Lionel works for me. You could have come to me directly instead of tiptoeing around asking the unreasonable.”

I was sure Lionel would have done it without complaint. Always the warrior before the commander. But regardless of what the knights wanted, what could the weak gain by being tossed around by the strong? Er, well, unless the weak was an apprentice or something. That was different.

Catherine and the Valkyries looked at me in shock. Truth be told, I wouldn’t have expected me to decline either, but I couldn’t be pushed around when it involved my team.

“I’m sorry,” Catherine said.

Her dejected, downcast expression hit me in the heart a little. She had been nothing but good to me since I’d first come to Church HQ, and I felt myself wavering. I remembered Catherine carrying herself with much more confidence and power when she had first been reinstated as captain of the guard. Back then, she wouldn’t have made cheap promises of a match with a general to her knights. Had something happened?

“I want to take your position into consideration,” I said after some thought. “So I’ll settle for a duel round-robin.”

“You will?” she said, surprised.

“I’m sure Lionel matches your skills as a leader and as a combatant, maybe even surpasses them, so it might be good for your knights to see him in action. That said, we’re a little outnumbered here, so for the sake of getting something out of this ourselves, the matches need to be one-on-one. If you all can agree to that, we can go to the joint field.”

“Thank you,” she responded. “Lionel, I hope to learn a lot from you.”

“I do as my master wishes,” Lionel answered simply. His stoic mask never wavered, but Ketty looked a little sulky. Was the whole force of the knights really out on the larger field? They must have been doing a lot of those joint drills.

“I have one question, though,” I said. “Why were you trying to get me to lead a legion of knights?”

I might have understood her insistence if we were at war or about to be. Catherine had been away from the battlefield for a long time, especially after her hiatus as captain, so in that case it would have made sense for her to want to study Lionel's techniques.

"Illumasia worries me, but then again, when doesn't it?" she replied. "What's really scaring us are the demons. It would be for your own good."

I didn't need to meet one of these so-called demons to know that they were a larger threat than the empire. But their lord wouldn't be born for another forty years or so. Didn't that mean the demons themselves would stay dormant until then? What did she know that I didn't? Still, I just couldn't see myself leading a force. Not in a million years.

"So you wanted to prepare me in case it comes to a fight with the demons," I surmised. "I understand that. But does a figurehead really need to study battle strategies?"

"I know I'm not making much sense," Catherine admitted. "But the fact of the matter is, you give people hope."

"Hope?"

Since when? What altruistic deeds had I done to cause that? None came to mind. Maybe it was my conquering of the labyrinths? Building a school? Being so skilled in holy magic that I couldn't shake that accursed Saint Weirdo name even after becoming an S-rank? I just didn't know, so I waited for Catherine to speak.

"Luciel, your healing and barrier magic make the people fighting with you feel safe. I don't mean to exaggerate, but those two things alone can make the soldiers' morale soar. And all that combined makes an army invincible."

"And that's why you want me as a symbol for the knights," I said. "All the same, why does that mean I have to *lead*?"

Invincible or not, healers didn't belong in the military, and when faced with an enemy, running away was the natural course of action. But when you had legions of people at your back, you couldn't make that decision lightly.

"The weak are drawn to people with charisma," Catherine said. "Every Demon

Lord has its mortal enemy, its hero. A champion. And whether you like it or not, you are a type of champion now.”

“Because I’m an S-rank.”

“Not just that. You became an ally of the people when you revolutionized the pricing of healing, when you became the first human on Yenice’s council, and when you slew a dragon.”

When she put it that way, it made me wonder if being an S-rank had ever done anything good for me...a thought I kept to myself. It wasn’t entirely true, and it was an immature sentiment, although I had a sneaking suspicion Her Holiness had something to do with my popularity.

Still, how did Catherine know enough about me to speak so decisively?

“Where did you hear all that?” I asked.

“Her Holiness hasn’t hidden what you’ve done. You’re famous even in the Healer’s Guild for that dragon business. Even if the pope *had* hid it, it wouldn’t have stayed under wraps for long once it started going around the Adventurer’s Guild.”

Question: was there anywhere in this world I could find peace? *Please answer, universe.*

“I’m seriously about to retire from life.”

Catherine giggled. “That’s funny,” she said, her voice bright yet sharp like a knife.

“I’ll take that as a ‘not happening,’” I groaned.

“Not while the Demon Lord is still a threat. And you couldn’t hide from the Church for long anyway. You’d be dragged back quick enough.”

But the stinking Demon Lord wasn’t going anywhere until the next hero was born. That was *decades* away.

“What about human rights? Don’t I get those?”

“Of course,” she said. “You know, you *have* released the Flame and Earth Dragons. It’s been a long time since Her Holiness has been in such a good mood,

and it's thanks to you."

"First of all, I got lucky. Secondly, you're dodging my question."

"As long as you continue to face your destiny with dignity, you'll get to keep your humanity, although your journey will never end. But hey, it beats doing paperwork, doesn't it? It's not like you're having to deal with nobles and their invitations."

She had a point, but I couldn't help feeling like she was cheating by bringing that up.

"So I have rights as far as the chain around my neck allows, huh?" I said. "Is that it?"

"That's about right. True freedom is the privilege of very few." Catherine cast her eyes down. "That even goes for me." She looked back up. "No one will fault you if you ever decide the chains chafe more than they protect, if you decide you'd rather take them off. Just know that a lot of people have high expectations for you. You overcome the impossible everywhere you go. It reminds them of Lord Reinstar."

I sighed. "All right, yeah, I get it."

"Then let's get going." She smiled again and locked her arm with mine. "Shall we?"

On the vast field, the Knights of Shurule were in formation and waiting. We began to train.

07 — Three Years in the Making

Long story short, it was a shutout.

Lionel and Catherine sparred before anyone else, with blunted weapons. Lionel equipped himself with a shield and greatsword similar in size to his own, opting for a patient, defense-oriented fighting style. Catherine wielded the Knights' standard sword and shield.

Not to spoil the whole thing, but Lionel won.

Catherine chose speed as her weapon, chipping away at Lionel's turtle-like defense with quick hit-and-run tactics. Had I been her opponent, I would have likely overextended myself and that would have been it for me. But Lionel was smarter and more perceptive. None of her blows seemed to land firmly enough.

At first, Catherine had the momentum, but just as she was pressing her advantage, Lionel saw his chance and bashed her with his shield. Using the opening it created, he swiped at her with the flat of his blade and the match was decided.

I was worried the captain's defeat would make things tense, but it only stirred the knights into an enthusiastic fervor. Lionel had certainly made a splash, in more of a positive way than I'd expected.

I jogged over and cast Middle Heal on them.

"You okay?" I asked Catherine.

"The pain's gone now," she said.

"Lionel?"

"I took no serious blows myself," he replied. His taciturn mood struck me. He was probably thinking the exact same thing I was.

"Catherine, what exactly did you get out of this?" I asked.

After a while, she replied, "You're a real piece of work, you know that?"

"I, uh... I guess?"

“General,” she said to Lionel, “I won’t ask you to fight every last one of us, but can I ask you to give each of the regiment captains a match?”

“If Mister Luciel wishes it,” Lionel replied.

“Sounds like he trusts you,” Catherine said to me.

Whether she was reading between the lines of Lionel’s behavior or genuinely ignorant of what he was feeling, there wasn’t a way out at this point.

“We trust each other,” I corrected her. “And the same goes for the rest of my team. We’re all comrades, companions, maybe even family to an extent. Or at least I’d like to think so.” My words came out naturally. Even I was a little surprised at just how much I had come to rely on my companions.

“I’ve got to say. I’m a little jealous of that.”

A reverential silence for Lionel’s strength fell, but personally, considering the capabilities of his opponents, I couldn’t say I hadn’t expected this outcome. Lionel’s only match in combat was Brod, and Brod was a *lot* stronger, leagues faster, than Catherine. True, the captain of the guard didn’t get to spar one-on-one very often, but even if she did, she would have needed strength in numbers or a thoroughly studied plan of attack to beat Lionel.

Catherine was a strong opponent, make no mistake. She may not have had any aces up her sleeve, any particular strengths or weaknesses that she played to, but that itself was her strength. Her grasp of the fundamentals was deeper than anyone else’s, and she was exceptionally well rounded, which was the silver bullet to my high-risk-high-reward style of fighting. Still, it was probably what had kept her from cracking Lionel’s defense and snatching a victory in her prior bout.

Man, fighting was complicated business.

Ketty wasn’t a hard hitter either. She prioritized speed and harassment in combat, while Kefin excelled in ambushing, getting in the enemy’s head, and making them let their guard down before going in for the kill. Meanwhile, I was over here getting carried by nothing but my weapon, my ability to constantly and perpetually heal myself, and barrier magic. Thinking positively, that surely meant I had nowhere to go but up, right?

After Lionel and Catherine's match, we hammered out who would fight against who moving forward. Lionel took charge of the captains, Ketty took the vice-captains, and Kefin sparred with the rank and file. Catherine and I observed.

"What was the point of that fight with Lionel?" I asked. "I get how you lost, but I still don't understand what it was for."

"It's good you know where I went wrong, at least," she said. "Honestly, I didn't see any way I could've won."

"His style had yours beat. But why bother fighting a battle you know you can't win? Personally, I would've avoided it entirely to live another day."

"Sometimes that isn't an option," a voice said behind me.

I whipped around and saw Lumina. Catherine left a moment later, saying she wanted to get a closer look at Lionel's matches.

"Orders are orders," Lumina continued. "We don't always get to choose the battlefield we stand on. That's why the Knights fight together, as a whole greater than the sum of its parts." I hummed in thought. "Or they used to, rather. The Knights as they stand now don't have the strength to tip the scales of any battle. The sum of its parts is not great enough, so the parts need to be improved."

That was what this training exercise was about. I almost pointed out to Lumina that she was surely the exception but held my tongue. I was starting to see a clearer picture of the strain that might have been causing Catherine's lack of energy.

"Yeah," I said vaguely. "I guess it does take a certain level of prowess, physical or strategic, to create an army that's more than just fodder."

"It does," Lumina agreed. "And Luciel, please don't take offense to what Lady Catherine said to you earlier."

"I don't recall her saying anything that would have insulted me."

"About your charisma, how people are drawn to your abilities," she said. "Lady Catherine is just worried about the Church."

The pope wasn't much of a public face. It was an S-rank's job to be the glue that holds things together, even if it made me look like the spokesperson for the Loyalists in the process.

"No offense taken. Really," I assured her. "Chances are she's right. If the demons do attack, I'll probably have to be there on the battlefield, saving lives with my magic. But she's panicking. I can tell."

"When Lady Catherine returned to her position, there was no doubt about her qualifications. There still isn't. She's a talented fighter and a skilled leader. But you became an S-rank at the same time she became a captain again, and she's seen the incredible feats you've accomplished. She looks at herself, but she doesn't see the same. She doesn't see the heroes and legends following behind her, so she concludes that she lacks charisma. She has no holy magic, so she...she is struggling with her thoughts right now."

"Really?"

After the ovation she had received upon her reinstatement? I thought she was greatly respected by her peers, but to think that I had been the cause of her insecurities...

I couldn't help feeling bad for her, but at the same time, I didn't personally enjoy living a life at the whim of some nebulous "destiny." Any popularity I had gained was pure coincidence. I simply happened to be kind of good at holy magic, and I happened to have found myself with the means to kill a dragon. That was all very convenient for the Church, but as far as I was concerned, I hadn't consented to any of it.

The thought of suddenly losing my powers hit me again. It was a terrifying idea, but all I could do was take life day by day.

"I want to be clear that I'm not faulting you by any means. More than anything, I wish I could lessen your burden," Lumina said as I gazed at her seriously. "I just want you to know that I'm doing what I can to one day shoulder the weight with you. As is Lady Catherine, I'm sure."

I had no idea Lumina had been thinking so much about me.

"I know what it's like to feel insecure," I admitted. My voice inadvertently

became a pitiful murmur. “I just want to live my life and help people on the way. This stuff with Illumasia, the demons—I’m not looking to join a war.”

“Of course you aren’t,” she replied. “And yet, you’ve done great things. You achieved S-rank at eighteen. You slew a dragon and joined Yenice’s council at twenty. I respect and admire you, Luciel. I do.”

“You don’t have to flatter me.” I laughed.

“I’m doing no such thing. We spoke of you quite passionately just last night, in fact. You’re an S-rank healer, the owner of a business, and you’ve really become quite strong and handsome. It’s like a fairy...” —Lumina’s face burned red —“tale...”

I couldn’t contain my laughter.



“Luciel,” she stammered, “c-can we maybe...”

“So that’s what the Valkyries get up to on their own.”

Well, I had certainly never expected to see myself peak with the Valkyries so soon. Or to such an extent. But they treated me no differently from the day we first met, so it seemed I would need to make myself comfortable in the little brother zone for a while longer. I knew the way the girls looked at me was like a sister watching a child grow into a man, and I couldn’t even argue because that was exactly what I was. Literally. The emotions swirling inside me were of an exceedingly complicated nature, but I let myself feel happy that Lumina had started to respect me.

“Not going to spar with Lionel?” I asked her.

“It’s been a while, so I asked Lady Catherine if you and I could have our long-awaited rematch,” she replied.

“You know I’ll be using magic, right?”

“By all means. I intend to come at you like a hammer to a rock-turtle’s shell.”

“Please don’t forget that I’m human.”

We continued to watch the three matches progressing on the field.

“How much difference is there between a captain and a vice-captain?” I asked.

“That depends on the regiment,” Lumina replied. “Still, I didn’t expect them to lose so one-sidedly.”

There really were no words to describe the bouts we witnessed. My team’s opponents did their utmost to attempt to land a single blow in the space of a minute, and the instant the minute was up, they were put down and given feedback. Lionel did that with each of the Valkyries except for Lumina and he was done in less than fifteen minutes.

“I’m sensing a light depression in the air,” I said. “You sure we should continue?”

“Things will change when we take the field. I imagine we’ll cause a bit of a

scene when everyone sees us.”

“No point in wasting time, then. When we’re done, we should train with the other Valkyries like we used to.”

“I would like that.”

Lumina and I found a place in the center of the field, and the knights cleared out for us.

“Those are your weapons?” Lumina asked skeptically.

I was equipped with a sword in one hand and a spear in the other, just like yesterday. I smiled, remembering how she had reprimanded me for this very style in the past. “I’ve got a few more tricks up my sleeve.”

“If you say so.”

She didn’t look convinced that it would matter, and I couldn’t wait to prove her wrong. She was about to see how much I had grown. Our first fight in three years was at hand.

My heart pounded in my chest. Lionel and the others had already paused their matches to look our way as Lumina and I awaited Catherine’s signal.

“Begin!”

I free cast Attack Barrier the instant Catherine’s voice rang out, pumped magic through my body with Physical Enhancement, and sprang towards Lumina. Her eyes widened, but she had charged moments before me and was preparing to strike. I hurled my spear at her.

Lumina grunted as she sidestepped the spear, breaking her stance for a precious second. I took advantage of it and swung at her as I summoned a shield to my free hand, but she deflected it with her own. The Illusion Sword could have cut it in two—if I were aiming to tear her in half, that is.

“You were trying to throw me off before the match even began,” Lumina observed. “I will admit you surprised me.”

“You’ve gotta do what you have to when you’re weak. I can’t go losing on the first blow in front of my team.”

“Bold talk for someone within sword range.”

Lumina dropped low and charged in. I swung my sword at her, and she rolled away from it with shock in her eyes.

“You read me,” she murmured. “How in the world were you training to be able to do that?”

“Well, Ketty’s faster, and Kefin can move without showing a single motion and disappear at will, so you’ll need more than speed to take me down.”

Part of it was that she reminded me of how Catherine fought, although Lumina might have been even stronger.

I was smiling and waving my sword smugly when I heard a voice mutter something.

“Accel Boost.”

“Accel what?”

A second later, I felt the hard ground against my back and saw the clouds drifting above me. Fast enough to remind me of Ketty’s speed, Lumina had summarily handed my butt to me on a silver platter.

“I just showed you the full extent of my power,” Lumina commented. “You’re not the only one who’s been improving.”

I stood up and approached her. “I could’ve sworn I heard you say something. ‘Accel Boost?’ What kind of magic is that? I didn’t even hear a chant. When did you learn how to free cast?”

Lumina flinched. “Please pretend you didn’t hear that. I’ll explain another time.”

I had learned something from that match. Catherine was indeed the captain of the guard, but Lumina was undoubtedly the strongest of the knights. My team regarded her with far more interest than they had Catherine. I could already hear them asking me to spend the next few days sparring with her. And just as well, really, because I had to settle the score at some point.

With the knights finally on the scoreboard after my defeat at Lumina’s hands, morale was restored and our training continued well into the afternoon.

08 — Chinks in the Armor

Silly me had thought that everyone would disperse to their respective duties after our training session was over. But the fact that I was having another session with the Valkyries had somehow gotten out, and some other regiments didn't like that. Their captains were currently accosting Catherine.

I minded my own business and turned my focus to my team.

"Good work out there. How were the Knights?" I asked.

Lionel's face was stern. "It's honestly worse than expected. I hadn't anticipated the Valkyries to be the standard, but I thought surely they would have been on the same level as the Order of Healing at the very least."

"Elaborate," I pressed him.

"If Illumasia had set their sights on Shurule when I still led their forces, I'm positive the republic would not exist today. The fact that the empire has been held back by history is Shurule's one saving grace, I suppose."

Lord Reinstar's legacy was the only thing standing in their way, it seemed. The barrier protecting the country was one such advantage Shurule enjoyed, allowing them to protect themselves without the need to include slaves in their standing army.

"Was there anything positive, you think?" I asked.

"Well, they are Shurulian," he said. "Your changes to healing pricing have earned you the support of adventurers and civilians the world over, which stands as a powerful deterrent for potential invaders."

So it was back to me again, not the Knights. It was sort of incredible how much ire I had probably earned from the empire unintentionally. Mental note: never go to Illumasia.

"Agreed," Ketty added. "Thought we might see healers bolstering the ranks like you, to be honest. I always thought it was a good thing Sir Lionel never suggested an invasion, but now I'm thinkin' Shurule's not gonna last long unless they've got some secret weapon."

That didn't sound very good. But their advice was solid. Still, a troop of healers would surely be the primary target of an enemy army, so they would need a cohort of guards all to themselves.

"Everyone in the Order was better than just about every knight here," Kefin remarked.

"My master had a lot to do with that. Plus they were extremely motivated," I said.

Lionel grunted. "I believe the best course of action would be for them to learn healing or barrier magic, or else establish a company of healers." He looked into the distant sky. "Or it may eventually be too late."

The regiments began to cram into the dining hall as Catherine continued to speak with their captains. My group didn't feel like fighting the rush, so we decided to head there last. Meanwhile, many of the knights who had fought Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin had come to hear their advice.

I had heard that human supremacism had been on the rise in the Church, but the knights regarded Ketty and Kefin with respect and decency. Perhaps someone was manipulating information, in which case I wanted to kick myself for not having Galba teach me some of the secrets of the trade.

As we waited for the dining hall to clear out, I cast Area Barrier on the knights receiving extra guidance so that they could put what they had learned to the test immediately. I didn't discuss anything related to healers, though. All I could picture when battle healers came to mind was a nightmare of forced conscription and tragedy. It would have been all too easy for one to find themselves separated, without magic, and that would be all the enemy needed to put them down. And it wasn't for me to decide the ethics or morals of war and who to drag into it.

I considered maybe placing healers into adventuring parties, but this world wasn't like a game. The discrepancy in stats between classes was too great, and healers wouldn't be able to keep up with the pace of increasingly powerful monsters. Another dead end.

That was the reality of this world. It was dangerous. Life was fragile. So it was

a good thing the Knights of Shurule were so adamant about improving. The rest was up to Captain Catherine.

Catherine was waiting for us when we finally headed for the dining hall. The training session with the Valkyries that afternoon had been replaced by joint drills. She had evidently given in to the captains' demands.

"I'd like General Lionel to examine and evaluate how well they do," Catherine explained. "If you'll allow him."

It felt like she had been asking more and more of us since we arrived at HQ—which, to be clear, did make me happy, since she was relying on others more, but maybe it wasn't a good habit for the Knights of Shurule to be getting into. Even if I wasn't one to talk—I had done much the same with Jord, and I still did it with Lionel—I really didn't think we were the ones she should have been leaning on.

Catherine was the captain of the guard. She should have been taking all this up with her sub-captains. If she wasn't doing that, then no wonder she had been so stuck in her head lately.

I remembered Lumina's words and gave in. "You want constructive feedback," I summarized.

"Exactly. Every knight here wants to be stronger. I want to help them."

They had only held these joint drills three times in the years I had spent at Headquarters. And they could hold them whenever they wanted, but I found the timing a little curious. Like she was just assuming everyone wanted what she did.

Not that I didn't understand wanting Lionel's perspective. Not at all. But Catherine was the captain of the guard, and her previous hiatus didn't change that. Lumina attested to her leadership skills, and Lionel had spoken a lot of criticism, yet there was not one word against her qualifications. Yeah, she had been out of the game for a while, but it had been over a year since then. Catherine had been a prodigy, earned her position at an absurdly young age, and on her own merits. And she couldn't keep a few subordinates in line?

I knew that I was partly the cause of this. I just struggled to process my feelings on the matter. It had surely taken a long time for the Knights to recover after the labyrinth incident, and the lack of any other trustworthy guard captains wasn't doing Catherine any favors. She desperately craved a confidant, a powerful leader to guide her. She wanted a mentor.

But given all that, I couldn't see her request as anything but a bad idea. If Lionel took the field and told her knights how to act, advised them, *led* them, it would call Catherine's own leadership into question.

"I have a suggestion, Captain," I said. "We will not participate in these exercises. We will watch from above, I'll collect my team's thoughts, and then I'll submit them to you in a report."

"Okay." She lowered her head. "Thank you." And then she left, her steps purposeful.

"You're certain we needn't participate?" Lionel asked as soon as she disappeared from view.

"Catherine's struggling with some insecurities right now," I said. "If you take control of these drills, it'll give others a reason to claim that she's unqualified to lead. She could be dismissed the moment we leave the city."

"She's more than talented enough for her position."

"I know that, but she doesn't believe it. She doesn't have the results or glowing achievements to prove it. Catherine might very well step down on her own if things go poorly enough."

I had never seen her so spineless before. Something must have happened in the past year, but I couldn't go prying.

"I dunno about that," said Ketty. "But I do know it might not be so wrong for her to find someone who can pick up the slack."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"A leader has a top-down view, a full grasp of several units that enact a single will," Kefin said. "And to be a leader, you need tangible results, the magnetism to draw people to your cause, and the charisma to keep them there. I think

that's what she means."

"The way you're talking makes it sound like this is obvious."

"His job *is* to know stuff," Ketty pointed out.

"So you're saying the Knights of Shurule aren't as cohesive as they should be," I said. I couldn't doubt their judgment. They knew how to gather and analyze information.

"Sir Lionel, for example, led Illumasia's forces at the front, giving orders as he fought right there with 'em," Ketty said. "And he'd be there at the rear guard if they had to retreat."

I could easily envision Lionel on the field, spear in hand, on horseback, weaving through and dodging arrows and spells, destroying anything that got too close.

"You value life, just as I did my men's," Lionel said. "Someday, your conviction may surpass even my own. And soldiers sense that. It raises their spirits. You lead a small troop well enough, and with practice, you may learn to extend your spirit to great armies."

"What do you all think?" I asked. "Am I going to end up leading the Knights of Shurule?"

"Maybe," Lionel said simply. "If you allow yourself to."

"You do kinda have a habit of getting into trouble every time we leave you alone," Ketty confessed.

"Frankly, I was amazed you even suggested observing over participating in the drills," said Kefin.

I was a little taken aback, to be honest. But the truth was the truth. I sucked it up.

"This might sound impolite, but I don't want to get tied down here any more than I already am," I said. "I'd rather be heading for Merratoni as soon as possible."

"Then I suggest we leave after dinner tonight," Lionel replied.

He was right. I needed to put my foot down, plain and simple. But not yet.

“I appreciate the advice, but there are still things I need to take care of. It’s too risky to leave yet, so we’ll plan on heading out in a week. The horses are still inside the hermit key too.”

“You pick the weirdest times to get headstrong, Chief,” Ketty said, smiling oddly.

“That’s one of his best traits,” Kefin stated.

Lionel hardly blinked. “We will follow as you lead, sir.”

Afterwards, we returned to the field and found seats on the viewing platform where I had joined Catherine while last observing the Knights’ joint drills. The templars and paladins were divided on two separate sides, Catherine leading the templars, Lumina leading the paladins despite being the youngest of the captains. There were four regiments each, but the templars outnumbered the paladins two to one.

Catherine’s templars were standing in semi-circular fan formation while Lumina’s paladins had formed a sharp V-shape.

The match began.

“Thoughts?” I asked.

“At first glance, one is tempted to believe that the templars have the advantage,” Lionel noted. “But the paladins have the edge in terms of raw ability. It will come down to how their respective leaders command their forces.”

“Right,” Ketty agreed. “Also, I’d wager this whole drill’s only happening because they’re betting on your healing magic.”

She had a point. The knights would certainly have use for it.

“In a fair fight, the paladins would win, even outnumbered,” Kefin mused. “Their skill makes the difference.”

“I’m still betting on Catherine’s templars,” I murmured. “Maybe a draw at worst.”

The three of them turned to me in surprise.

“Why’s that?” Ketty asked.

“Lumina looks up to Catherine,” I explained. “And she knows that if Catherine loses, it’ll affect the Knights’ morale. I also can’t sense any real energy from the paladins.”

The divides in the Knights were incredibly obvious from a bird’s eye view.

“You’re paying attention,” Lionel noted. “The paladins’ victory is contingent upon them fighting at their best, but I’m sensing a lack of motivation from their ranks. Your prediction may be accurate.”

“A lack of motivation?” I repeated.

“Perhaps they’re aware that they’ll have to lose. Perhaps it’s something else entirely. Regardless, this entire battle feels disingenuous. A green commander like yourself would have no trouble leading masses like those.”

“Wait, you guys totally already knew that,” I said accusingly. “If I can tell just by watching from above, you should’ve seen it when you were in the thick of it with them earlier today. I’ve got a long way to go, don’t I?”

Lionel grinned. “It will come to you in time.”

I wasn’t so sure about that.

The exercise ended exactly as predicted. Catherine and the templars emerged victorious.

09 — Anomalies in the Labyrinth of Trials

After dinner, I separated from the group and headed for the labyrinth. My card thankfully still worked on the magic elevator, and soon, I was at the dungeon's entrance. I made out a faint stench emanating from within and decided to down some Substance X for good luck before descending. It had been a friggin' eternity since I had last leveled up anyway, and it wasn't like it was going to happen anytime soon.

Putting aside my inner turmoil, I set my sights on the tangible struggle before me and drank my first mug of Substance X in what felt like a long time. The world spun around me, and I found myself barely remaining on one knee by the time my consciousness returned.

"I'm going soft," I muttered.

I cut through the little shop and opened the door to the labyrinth. It wasn't long before I encountered a ghoul, who I quickly dispatched with a cast of Heal. I picked up its gem, and only then did I realize the problem.

"What's a ghoul doing on the first floor?" I mumbled. They weren't supposed to appear for another twenty floors. "Something definitely smells, and it's not the labyrinth."

The monsters became more prevalent the farther down I went. Swiftly dealing with each wandering mob, I eventually reached the tenth floor boss room.

"If the monster swarm shows up in here, there's no question about it. The labyrinth has been reactivated."

I opened the door and paced to the center of the room. The moment I did, the dim chamber lit up, revealing the monsters before me.

"There's less than the last time I was here," I murmured. "Weird."

The battle ended with a cast of Purification but not before memories of my first visit sent a shiver through my body.

"I can't believe I got myself trapped in here with no magic at level one."

I really should have died then. Somehow, I had pulled through, but the slightest misstep would have ended me right there.

I gathered the magic stones, beyond relieved that I wouldn't have to relive the trauma, and pressed on.

"Even more."

I didn't get it. What were all these powerful monsters doing so early in the labyrinth? It should have been gradually losing power since I conquered it...unless it had gradually been *regaining* its power. Any guess I could conjure up was as good as the next, so I simply continued down from one floor to the next.

A single swing of my cleansing magic-infused Illusion Staff turned the undead into stones before they could even cry out in dramatic agony. At least I could still rely on old faithful.

In the case of the Flame Dragon's dungeon, the labyrinth's reactivation had been instigated by a group of adventurers tampering with a magic stone that had been a trap. But very few people knew of this labyrinth's existence, let alone had access to it, and even fewer had the spiritual resistance skill necessary to make it to the very end. Meaning whoever the culprit was, they had to be formidable.

"It couldn't be Estia," I mused. "No."

Her powers definitely met the criteria, but the Spirit of Dusk wouldn't have put her in that much danger. Had this happened because I left the central magic stone untouched?

I headed deeper in search of clues but had to turn back before I could come up with anything.

"I'll need more time to look into this."

The bosses were missing in every main chamber, all the way to the thirtieth floor. I took what solace I could from that.

The pope needed to hear about this.

After breakfast the next morning, I told my team to remain on standby and

went to meet with the pope in her chambers.

“Thank you for seeing me in private, Your Holiness,” I said on one knee.

“Think nothing of it,” she replied from behind her veil. “You would not come to me in this manner if it were not a matter of great importance.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.” I paused and began with the most pressing concern. “I have suspicions that the Labyrinth of Trials is active again.”

“What?!” the pope exclaimed. “Again, you say? How do you know this?”

Based on her reaction, I was the first person to bring it up. And if labyrinths reactivating was a surprise to her, maybe she wasn’t as knowledgeable about the dungeons as I had once thought.

“I was there yesterday and discovered monsters on floors where they shouldn’t have been appearing. So I continued on the assumption that the labyrinth had revived.”

“And what did you find?”

“It’s hard to draw any conclusions yet, but I’ve seen this happen before in Yenice. In the Flame Dragon’s Labyrinth of Will.”

“Do you know what caused it?” she asked.

“There was a trap at the very end, a large magic stone. I believe touching it alerted the Wicked One, and the unfortunate adventurers responsible were turned into undead.”

“You mean...” Her Holiness pieced it together. “You mean to say someone may have infiltrated the labyrinth! Is that what you’re implying?”

“Yes. It could have been the exorcist who took my place or maybe a knight who wanted to level up. Or it could be that the monsters were simply ignored until things got worse.”

The Spirit of Dusk was technically among my list of suspects, but I didn’t think Estia would do something so dangerous, so she was safe for now. True, the spirit could have nullified the awful smell or revived the labyrinth with her powers, but in her defense, I had already confirmed that she wasn’t an evil entity with a pretty high degree of certainty.

“Do you plan to delve into the labyrinth again?” the pope asked.

“Yes, Your Holiness,” I replied. “I’ve always been a good fit for this dungeon.”

“And how will you explain it to your attendants?”

She had an astoundingly valid point. The labyrinth was still confidential, and I was sworn to secrecy.

I put a hand to my chin and thought. “I’ll tell them you entrusted me with an important mission and have them train with the Knights in the meantime.”

“Very well,” Her Holiness replied. “My thanks, and my apologies for souring your return with such duties.”

“Yes, Your Holiness,” I said. “I want to mention that I spoke with Estia as well. About the Spirit of Dusk.”

“I see. And you suspected her due to her connection with the spirit. I’m glad to see you’ve come to trust her.”

“For the time being, Your Holiness,” I corrected her.

“Ever cautious. I will have Granhart investigate the matter of the exorcist who succeeded you.”

“Please do. If I may ask, I’ve been curious about your class, Your Holiness.”

“Spirit summoner,” the pope replied. “Naturally, I have been blessed by the Elemental, but I am not its chosen one, nor am I the one fated to join you. I do, however, wield the choice of who *is*.”

I had almost expected Her Holiness to be the one I was waiting for, and I couldn’t tell whether the pounding in my chest was because of that or the effects of the Substance X from yesterday. That would make the pope...what, my mother-in-law? Something to that effect? I didn’t know how I felt about her holding sway over who my soulmate would be, but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

“If you’ve been blessed by the Elemental, then does that make you the last mystic of the spirits?” I asked. “The previous Spiritsworn?”

The one with the blessing that the Earth Dragon had said I was supposedly

drawn to. But that didn't seem right if it included Her Holiness.

"You've heard of the mystics, have you?" the pope responded. "That is an astute observation. Only those who can wield the power of the spirits can inherit the Elemental's blessing, and in truth, I was shocked to see such a class among your jobs. There is much I wish to share with you, but alas, I can not defy the will of the spirits."

So if I had been promoted to a spirit knight, I would have earned the Elemental's blessing? Was that the only way? I had a feeling it wasn't.

"Does this relate to why you wanted to postpone my class advancement?" I asked.

"Yes, in part. Of course, had I not, you would have lost your holy magic for spirit magic, which I should think would be rather inconvenient for the both of us."

"I have to agree."

Holy magic was kind of my shtick and pretty important to the whole "not dying" thing I was trying to do, which I would have failed at fairly early on if I had been without it.

She nodded. "Then we are in agreement. Shall we return to the subject at hand?"

"Yes, Your Holiness."

She gave a mild smile and said, "My blessing allows me to know the whereabouts of others blessed by the spirits, and the closer they are, the more accurate my readings become."

"Even someone like Estia, who's been possessed?"

"Ah, so you know. And here I thought the Spirit of Dusk might have revealed herself to you directly. So shy, that one." Seriously, how much did Her Holiness know that I didn't? Too much, if you asked me, but leave it to Lord Reinstar's daughter. "I summoned Estia to the Holy City so that the Spirit of Dusk would know I am always watchful. Magic leaves traces, you see. She can not hide within Estia."

What was she, some kind of spirit radar? She hadn't brought up Lihzalea, though, so I refrained from doing so too. The spirit had mentioned something to do with human experiments and I figured freaking Her Holiness out with information like that wasn't such a good idea.

I was almost somewhat comfortable with our intel on the Spirit of Dusk when more awful possibilities came to mind.

"Could the Spirit of Dusk's power entice, hypnotize, or control people?" I asked.

"I certainly hope not. One could be made to simply forget about such abilities or how to prepare for them, so it is fortunate that the Spirit of Dusk is not our enemy. Even if Estia were someone of such character, there is still the business with Forêt Noire."

I had a feeling I wouldn't get any answers about that whole affair even if I asked. But I still needed information in order to create countermeasures against Lihzalea.

"I see. I've heard some talk of the demons, so I only ask out of concern should they use similar kinds of magic...although maybe I ought to be concerned with the demons themselves rather than the Spirit of Dusk."

"There are many monsters with mind-altering abilities," the pope said, "so it stands to reason that demons may possess such powers as well. Rest assured, you and anyone else blessed by the spirits have little to fear in that regard."

"Well, you see, Your Holiness, there is another person I met who shares Estia's powers."

"And where is she?"

"She disappeared. I wanted to bring her with us, but she simply vanished."

"Hm. We have scientists studying the Spirit of Dusk. I will bring this to them."

Perhaps we would eventually find a way to help Lihzalea.

"Thank you, Your Holiness," I said. She hummed in approval. "Now, I have Forêt in the stable inside our hermit key. Would you like to see her?"

"You have her?! Truly?!" the pope exclaimed with glee. Her voice was like

that of an innocent child, all traces of mystical dignity gone. “Let me see her!”

I turned the key, opened the door, and shouted into the stable for Forêt. She immediately trotted out, and upon seeing Her Holiness, Forêt galloped up to her and began licking her cheek. She never looked that happy when she was biting my head.

“Yes, I missed you too!” the pope giggled. “That tickles!”

At least it put Her Holiness in a good mood. The pope hugged Forêt’s neck and began murmuring something to her at a volume too low for me to hear. She continued to speak with Forêt for some time, communicating in a different way than the Spirit of Dusk had done a few days prior.

When they were finished, the pope asked me, “Could I bid you leave her here with me for a time?”

Forêt looked at me in a way that left little room for refusal.

“Well, if that’s what she wants. I’ll come back later and leave the hermit key with you for now.”

“I thank you, Luciel. I would have you meet with Estia now. She is with Granhart. Tell the ladies to return on your way out.”

With Granhart? In that macabre torture chamber? I wasted no time and headed that way, warning the pope’s attendants about the sudden equine company before leaving.

10 — A Second Trial

I knocked on Granhart's door but received no response. I felt a tense presence on the other side, as if someone were waiting for me to leave, and knocked again.

"It's Luciel," I said. "Granhart, are you there? Estia?"

The tension in the air dissipated and the door opened. Estia was on the other side. Behind her was Granhart, face down on his desk. He seemed to be sleeping.

"What's happening here?" I asked.

"The oaf needs to choose his words with a little more tact," the girl said, two voices overlapping one another. "Maybe he'll learn in his dreams."

I was evidently speaking with the spirit, but maintained my composure. "It's a long way from dusk. What are you doing taking control of Estia this early in the morning?"

"Well, our oafish friend here had some questions for her, and he seemed to think every stumble of her words was his cue to lambast the girl further. If he wanted answers, he should not have begun interrogating her as if she had committed a crime."

She was certainly in a bad mood. What was Granhart doing questioning one of Her Holiness's direct subordinates? He did have a tendency to make even the most simple of inquiries feel like an accusation, though, and he was easily the most uptight individual at HQ, so I couldn't blame Estia for feeling threatened. If nothing else, the guy took his job seriously.

"Did that really warrant knocking him out?" I asked.

"Place yourself in Estia's shoes, will you?" The voices resonated. "The pressure, the endless questions, it's a miracle the girl didn't up and flee entirely."

"What did he want to know about her?"

“Wrong,” the spirit said. “It is not what *he* wanted to know about *her*, it is what *she* wanted to know about *you*.”

Before I could get the next word out, I felt the air around her relax.

“Um, I...didn’t know what kind of person you were. *Really* were, I mean,” she said in one voice.

“I’m speaking to Estia now, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What kinds of things were you looking for?” I asked.

“Your reputation,” Estia replied. “If your status was dishonest. If maybe you were a slaver. But, well, you didn’t *seem* dishonest, um, but a lot of healers don’t necessarily seem dishonest at first.”

Finally. Something was starting to make sense. This was why she had put so much distance between us and why I had struggled to trust her for so long.

“You could have just talked to me,” I said. “Granhart’s as strict as they come in Shurule. He probably thought you were asking questions to get up to no good.”

“I’m sorry.”

The misunderstanding was resolved. Waking up Granhart, though, was sure to be a mess of its own, so I focused on Estia for the time being. The matter of the exorcist who had come after me would have to wait.

“Water under the bridge. Come with me,” I said.

“To where?” she asked hesitantly.

“Her Holiness.”

“Now hold on,” the second voice chimed in, overlapping Estia’s. “You would report me for this? All to keep me from my dear sister? Who is it, human? Who have you fallen for so hard that you’ve lost your wits? My sister? Estia? Or...could it be? *Me*? It better not be me, human.”

All right, she liked Forêt. A lot. That much was abundantly clear. The rest of that little tirade? Yeah, no idea what that was about. In any case, the spirit

seemed awfully afraid of the pope, and I was dangerously lacking in patience.

I took a deep breath. "I would like you to list everything you think could *possibly* indicate that I have any romantic feelings for you, Estia, or your sister."

"You would?"

"I'm begging you. You *have* to learn to understand human behavior one of these days." I looked at Granhart snoozing at his desk and suddenly felt extremely jealous. I left a note next to him. "There. You shouldn't feel so intimidated anymore if he brings you in for questioning again. Let's get going."

"I knew you weren't as stupid as you seem," the voices said. "You're *positive* you don't fancy me?"

I refused to continue to entertain the spirit, and soon, we were back at the pope's chambers.

"Here we are," the spirit remarked. "This brings back memories. It was but a fleeting moment in the life of a spirit, but there was another I came here with in the past."

She had actually been here with Estia not too long ago, but maybe she didn't know what was happening while lying dormant inside her. But that wouldn't make sense; the spirit sure liked to show up with perfect timing.

The "other one" she had come with was probably Lord Reinstar, if I had to guess. I had no end of questions, really, but the spirit within Estia simply smiled.

I knocked on the door. "It's Luciel again. I'm here with Estia."

"Enter," a voice on the other side replied.

The door opened an instant later as the attendants filed out of the hall and we replaced them. The horse standing next to the pope of the Church of Saint Shurule made the scene a little incongruent, and I could only imagine how it must have looked to the innocent attending ladies.

I moved to bow before Her Holiness when Estia continued walking past me and towards the pope. Sensing danger, I stood between them at once, but the pope lay a hand on my shoulder from behind and placed herself before Estia.

"It has been a long time, Dusk," Her Holiness said.

“Last I saw you, there were tears in your eyes, Fluna,” the spirit replied, sighing. “Now you’re a pope.”

For some reason, possibly because I was here, they spoke without any odd use of magic, in the common Galdardian tongue. And they talked like it had been an eternity, but the pope had dispatched Estia herself. Unless she hadn’t met the Spirit of Dusk at the time? Perhaps someone had been in the room and the spirit hadn’t been able to reveal herself.

“I take it you know each other,” I said.

“I am acquainted with all spirits,” the pope replied. “There was a time, however, when I was...less strong.”

“A good man knows when to let sleeping giants lie, you know,” the spirit said.

Forêt neighed as if in agreement. I elected to make myself scarce and take my place as the conversation’s third (fourth?) wheel with pride.

“You did not send your errand boy to me simply to exchange pleasantries, I assume,” the spirit continued.

“I did want to see you again, truthfully,” the pope replied, “but that question may be better answered by Luciel.”

The longer I spoke with Her Holiness, the more I found her voice growing on me. It was regal, ethereal, and honestly, a little cute.

“First of all,” I said, “do you know about the labyrinth underneath the Church?”

“A labyrinth?” The spirit closed her eyes and was silent for a while. “True, I feel darkness emanating from what used to be an audience chamber.”

“Indeed,” the pope remarked. “It came into being some fifty years ago and has played no small part in the Church’s atrophy. That is, until Luciel conquered it on his own and we were finally able to lay our fallen clergy to rest.”

The Spirit of Dusk looked at me.

“I only managed because all the monsters happened to be undead,” I explained.

The spirit nodded and murmured, “Yes, I feel a deep darkness. A common enough environment for monsters of the night. Still, you have much to be proud of if it’s true you survived a labyrinth on your own. It’s a great achievement that’s been celebrated for generations.”

“Thank you.”

The spirit raised an eyebrow at me “So, what’s the dilemma?” she asked.

I turned to Her Holiness, and she nodded. “I went into the labyrinth yesterday and found powerful monsters,” I said. “As if the dungeon had been reactivated. Do you have any idea what that could mean?”

“No,” the spirit answered flatly. “And I will add that I’ve nothing to do with it. I couldn’t possibly do something so mindlessly dangerous to Estia.”

“I was worried that you entering it might have caused some kind of resuscitation at first, but now I see that you wouldn’t do that,” I replied.

“I’d have called you blind otherwise. Yes, I’m well aware of the demonic connotations of dark magic, but I’ll have you know I don’t make a habit of running about spreading miasma for the fun of it.”

There was more sadness than anger in her voice, a quiet sound that hid far more emotion underneath than was visible on the surface.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know, but that’s still no excuse.”

“Don’t waste your effort. It’s nothing I’m not used to,” she stated. “Well, aside from Reinstar. And Fluna and her mother. They were different.”

The gentle expression on her face told me everything I needed to know about how much she cherished those people.

“Dusk, have you manipulated anyone recently?” the pope asked.

“I have induced amnesia and put others to sleep, but I’ve not toyed with any minds directly. My host limits me, so I’m unable to, and even if I were, I would do nothing to bring harm to Estia.”

She couldn’t have been lying. Not just because I didn’t expect a spirit to lie. Forêt would have known had she tried. And that put the majority of suspicion on the exorcist who’d come after me. The next question was how a healer could

have made it through the entire labyrinth, even weakened as it was. Unless...

"I think I have another possible perpetrator besides a simple exorcist," I said.

"Go on," Her Holiness urged me.

"What if," I murmured, "there's an Illumasian spy? I understand that the possibility would place me in a questionable light since I'm the one who brought Lionel here, but for what it's worth, I haven't been here in over a year."

"What basis do you have for this assumption?"

"When I was in Yenice, there was a man who had been posing as a slaver there for years, which tells me it's entirely possible for a spy to be hiding right under our noses as a knight or even healer. Of course, that's all it is right now. A possibility."

And with enough people, a guide, and magic item countermeasures for the wraiths, the labyrinth was entirely traversable for someone like that. Then again, maybe a magic item itself could have restarted the labyrinth. No, too convoluted.

"I will entrust Catherine with that concern. May I entrust the labyrinth to you?"

"I'm not particularly keen on going through it by myself again, but I will obey your orders."

It wouldn't be like before anyway. I was well-equipped and at a much higher level. Naturally, if it were any other labyrinth, I would have been out, no question, but the undead were no real issue to me.

"Then I will join you," the spirit offered.

"I don't take anyone who can't resist the wraiths' mind magic," I stated firmly. "Sorry, I'm not looking to get stabbed in the back."

"Then it's a good thing such spells are useless against me even when Estia is in control. My presence protects her from outside interference."

For a moment, I considered how that might be extended to Lionel and the others, then remembered that the labyrinth was supposed to be a secret and scrapped the thought. Anyway, the more help the better, I figured.

“In that case, I need to fill in my team first, so we’ll begin after lunch.”

“Whatever you think is best,” said the pope.

I bowed in reply, and the spirit added, “I do have old memories of that place.”

“You be careful as well, Dusk,” Her Holiness cautioned the spirit.

“I always am.”

I felt like several rules of etiquette and rank were being breached as Estia patted the pope on the head, and yet I was powerless to stop it.

I explained the situation to the team with Estia over lunch, dancing around mentioning the labyrinth by referring to my mission as “a special S-rank ceremony.” Estia, of course, as a member of the Church, would be joining me.

Until I returned, they were to help whip the Knights into shape for as long as they were needed, which made Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin very enthusiastic about putting their plans together. When Lionel asked how he should handle the apathetic paladins he had noticed during the drills, I told him that if he and Catherine couldn’t find a suitable solution, he could take appropriate measures at his own discretion.

It was painfully obvious that they had seen through me almost immediately—I remembered how poorly they had evaluated the Knights to be during the drills, and they had told me in no uncertain terms that another training session would not be pretty. Yet, they played along.

“Return safely,” Lionel said. “And quickly, so that my rematch with the Whirlwind can come all the sooner.”

“Or at least before I get bored,” Ketty added.

“I will not bring shame to you in your absence, sir,” Kefin declared.

I offered my thanks. It was nice to have people worrying about me, people I could trust to leave in my place.

Dhoran, Pola, and Lycian had been out since morning. They were free to act as they pleased now, and people knew they were with me, so I could only guess that they were out procuring materials. Hopefully Pola and Lycian were seeing

the sights, learning a lot, and coming up with ideas for convenient new inventions.

I boarded the magic elevator with Estia. Whatever the problem with the labyrinth was, it was stemming from either the fortieth-or fiftieth-floor boss rooms. Until then, though, crises notwithstanding, we could probably look around for treasure chests. As long as the Spirit of Dusk kept a close eye on Estia.

We soon came to the labyrinth's entrance.

"Ready?" I asked her.

"Yes, sir," Estia replied. "I'll follow your lead."

"The spirit's not taking over?"

"She says she won't step in unless it gets dangerous." She gave me a nervous smile. "And she also says to not worry because she'll protect me from the miasma."

I wasn't sure what to make of that, but I took her word for it.

"First, wear this," I told her.

"A Church-issue robe?"

"It'll help with the miasma."

"I see. Thank you." Estia appeared to have softened up quite a bit around me.

The shop in front of the elevator was closed up and unmanned. Evidently, no one had taken Catherine's place, which certainly didn't do anyone taking *my* place any favors. I made a note to bring that to someone's attention. But it didn't look like anyone had rummaged through the empty store, so maybe it wasn't a real problem.

With that, we took our first steps into the Labyrinth of Trials.

11 — Growth

“You might want some nose plugs from here on.”

“I guess I’ll hang on to them.” Estia hesitantly took the nose plugs from me.

“Here, take this holy silver sword and shield too. They’ll work wonders if you imbue them with your magic.”

“Okay. Thank you, sir.”

And that was the extent of our exchange. I felt like I was spinning my wheels trying to lighten the mood around her. What a great start to our labyrinth adventure.

“There.” I pointed. “That’s a zombie. Seen one before?”

“At the empire when I was little.”

“Okay. What about ghouls?”

“The empire conducted experiments with the undead. The strongest mages were turned into wraiths. Low-level corpses became zombies or mummies. High-level ones turned into ghouls or death knights. So yes.”

How in the world... Never mind. I didn’t want to know how she knew all that. It was bad for my heart.

“Be sure to share any information you have, okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

My impression of Estia had changed a great deal over the last few hours now that I actually knew a few things about her. It also helped that she didn’t retreat from me every time I stood next to her. We’d have a problem if her inability to hold a conversation wasn’t so charming, though.

The smell got worse the deeper we went, but it didn’t slow us down. We were at the tenth floor boss room in thirty minutes, and ten minutes later we were moving on. Battles ended quickly—so quickly, in fact, that picking up the magic stones took longer than the fights themselves. I knew a few crafters who would be very happy with the amount of stones we were gathering.

“Feels like there are more monsters than last time,” I remarked. “It’s only going to get tougher, so let me know if it’s too much.”

“Yes, sir.”

Those two words were just about all I could force out of her. She kept her sentences short and her mouth tight. To be fair, though, she had never been much of a talker.

“Feel free to speak up whenever. I’m sure you and the spirit will catch things I wouldn’t on my own.”

“Um, yes,” Estia replied. “Thank you, sir.”

I sensed her relaxing a little more. Maybe mentioning the spirit helped to take the pressure off her. As we pressed on, the tension gradually dissipated.

“Wraiths on the twentieth floor,” I said. “The labyrinth definitely did some leveling up of its own.”

“What used to be here?”

“Ghouls, mummies, ghosts, skeleton knights, that sort of thing. Wraiths aren’t supposed to show up until at least floor thirty. Gives me a bad feeling. But let’s not rush. We’ll take a break at the thirtieth floor boss— I mean, in the main chamber.”

“Understood, sir.”

True to the Spirit of Dusk’s word, Estia was unaffected by the wraiths’ magic. They and the death knights posed no obstacle as we proceeded.

We were resting in the third boss room when I asked Estia, “Feeling tired?”

“Not particularly,” she responded. “You’ve done most of the work, sir.”

I didn’t quite believe her; she looked a little lethargic. But she would have let the Spirit of Dusk take over if she was truly exhausted.

“I thought you might be drained after all the walking and fighting we’ve done, but if you say so.”

“An average person might be, but I’m fairly high-leveled. And I’ve been...comfortable lately.”

Comfortable wasn't familiar to her, I took it. She told me her level, and it was the exact same as Kefin's before we had left Yenice. I decided to shift the subject to myself.

"I'm surprised how easily we've been getting through," I said. "Maybe it's my higher stats or maybe my training's been paying off. Do you want to take more of the battles?"

"No, that's okay. I don't really like fighting."

"*THANK YOU!*" I cried. Estia flinched, but I was too ecstatic about *finally* finding a sane, like-minded individual to care about looking crazy. "Sorry, I've just been constantly surrounded by people who want to do nothing but swing sharp edges around."

Estia giggled. "Yeah, you're not wrong there," she said. "How long did it take you to come this far the first time?"

I thought back on my old labyrinth-trotting journey, my old strategies. It had taken me the better part of half a year, out of a total year and a half, to reach this point.

"A few months at least. But before that, I trained at the Merratoni Adventurer's Guild. Then Church HQ summoned me, and half a year of fighting for my life later, I made it to this room." I cracked a nostalgic smile. "I know I'm weak now, but back then it wasn't even funny."

"It sounds like you've worked hard to come this far."

"I don't know if I'd say that. There was a lot of recklessness involved, punctuated by even more luck."

It wasn't *entirely* luck, granted, but needless to say, I would not have survived without Monsieur Luck.

"Sure, but it still took effort," Estia insisted.

"Maybe," I conceded. "I'm not sure I'd say I necessarily worked *for* anything. I just did what I could with what I had at the time."

Survival had been the only thing on my mind. And that didn't really feel like work, let alone *hard* work, unless you could call doing the bare minimum

“effort.”

I felt a knot in my chest. Had I changed since coming to this world? Had I grown as a person?

The monsters on the thirty-first floor had jumped to a new class yet again. Red-eyed death knights and translucent, ethereal entities that only needed a scythe to complete the Grim Reaper look—wraith-like creatures of greater size than any I’d seen before—wandered the halls.

“Keep your distance. I might not be able to make it in time if you’re in trouble,” I warned Estia. “But also protect me if you can.”

No shame. I had seen Estia fight on our way here, and she wasn’t an amateur. I had yet to see the full extent of her abilities, though.

“Yes, sir,” she replied, skillfully dispatching a death knight and his goons.

I faced my own enemies, trying not to be too jealous of her skills. “So you can cut right through bone, huh? No way I could do that.”

Not without the Illusion Sword, anyway. I deftly swapped between sword and staff mode as needed, cutting down and purifying monsters, then promptly collecting their gems.

“We’re starting to see monsters that should only be on the fortieth floor,” I noted. “It’s anyone’s guess what could be waiting for us, so we’ll eat and get some sleep when we get there. After that, it’s a straight shot to the end.”

“Yes, sir.”

We rapidly descended, smoothly and without triggering a single trap, until we approached the fortieth floor boss room.

For the first time since we had entered the labyrinth, Estia spoke up and asked a proper question. “Mister Luciel, are all labyrinths this simple?”

“No way,” I replied at once. “I’m just familiar with this one, so we’re not getting nearly as lost as we normally would.”

“Yeah, true. We haven’t made a single wrong turn now that you mention it.”

“Good thing I made those maps, huh? Also, the monsters are up against a bad matchup. Normally, the wraiths’ mind magic would be devastating, but it doesn’t faze us.”

“They’re really that dangerous?”

“Generally,” I said. “And the undead *really* don’t like holy magic, so that gives us a pretty solid edge.”

Estia mumbled something in affirmation. I wondered what had caused her to suddenly be so inquisitive. I certainly didn’t mind; it was just odd.

“Something bothering you?” I asked.

“Just wondering if I really need to be here,” she murmured. She seemed really obsessed with making herself useful.

“Let me be straight with you. I’m positive I could have made it here on my own, but that doesn’t mean I wanted to. I’ve hardly even tapped into my magic. I appreciate you being here.” Being alone was hard on the mind in a lot of ways, after all.

Estia held her hands together and offered a smile that wasn’t quite convincing. “Then I’m glad.”

“Don’t let your guard down yet,” I warned her, steeling myself for what lay ahead. “Last time I fought this boss, I got locked in and it took me half a year to beat. I’ll need your and the spirit’s help to make sure we don’t have a repeat of that little incident.”

“Half a year? How did you survive?”

“I told you, I get lucky a lot. It happened right after I’d stocked up on tons of food.”

“You’re...not joking,” Estia murmured. “I honestly thought you were exaggerating to lighten the mood.”

“I only lie for good reason. You can ask around if you don’t believe me. It’ll probably be even crazier than what I could describe.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

I still felt a bit of distance between us, but it was closing ever so slightly.

We proceeded to the boss room door and opened it. And inside, waiting for me, was him.

The lich knight.

I couldn't contain my grin. "Fancy meeting you here."

"This power," Estia gasped. "That's no ordinary monster, sir."

Even in death, the lich knight possessed the same sort of intimidating presence as Brod, and I had regarded it accordingly as my second master. Seeing the monster again, with fresh eyes, I was reassured that it was deserving of the title.

Estia was trembling.

"You stay back," I told her. "I'll handle this."

"You can't be serious. There's no way you can take on that *thing* by yourself."

"Only one way to find out. It's time to see how much I've grown."

To be fair, with the Holy Dragon spear in my left hand and the Illusion Sword in my right, it wouldn't be an entirely accurate evaluation. But still, after over a hundred levels since I had last faced the lich knight as a beginner, I was surely much stronger.

My joints locked up at the monster's foreboding presence. And yet, I felt like I could give my old rival a run for his money.

"My name is Luciel, S-rank of the Church of Saint Shurule," I declared, "and you, my mentor, will be my judge. Let's see what I can do, shall we?"

The lich knight's massive, deadly greatsword swept past my face, its spear closing in directly after it. One of the five openers. Its patterns were simple.

I parried the spear, and the greatsword returned a beat later, just like I knew it would. I let it glance off my own spear, barely redirecting it away from me, and shifted my center of mass to deliver a full swing at the lich knight's exposed neck. It caught the blow against its spear, then prepared to counter with the greatsword, but my Illusion Sword tore through the spear and continued

towards its target.

The lich knight's head came clean off.

"Well, that was anticlimactic," I said, exhaling. "I remember being driven to tears when I finally beat him for the first time."

My body remembered everything, all the moves down to my bones. Everything about my first battle with the lich knight had come rushing back. All the emotions, the sheer will and defiance of death that had been my only weapon against such an overpowering opponent.

Suddenly, I realized something—why it felt like past me, who ran headfirst into battle like an idiot, seemed to have been making so much more progress than I was now. It was something the lich knight had taught me.

Essentially, I was putting myself on a pedestal.

"Wow! That was incredible, Mister Luciel!" Estia cheered. "How did you do that? How did you stand up to that monster without even flinching? You've been holding back this whole time, haven't you?" She was beaming from ear to ear. "I had no idea you were so strong!"

I gave her an ironic smile back. "No. I owe this win to my past self. For putting in the effort. Come on, let's eat."

Estia raised her eyebrows in surprise. And I felt more alive than I had in ages.

12 — Musings From Dusk

After dinner, I purified myself and Estia, then offered her the angel's pillow and instructed her to get some sleep. She acquiesced without argument and within seconds was breathing deeply.

She was stronger than I had given her credit for, but it was strange how human and expressive she could be during a conversation yet so mute and vacant during combat. It wasn't quite that she was utterly emotionless or apathetic, just...deficient, almost.

"After some rest, we'll eat again, then we're clearing the labyrinth," I said to her sleeping form. "Got any questions before then?"

"Can't say I do."

"You don't have to pretend to be Estia, spirit. I know you have something to say. You always do."

"Well, not this time," she said. "I would have called you weak had the trek thus far winded you. I will praise you for noticing my presence, however. Estia sleeps, so I have taken control."

With one of the two slumbering, the spirit spoke in only one voice, but the difference in their demeanors—the air about them, so to speak—was a dead giveaway. Seeing as she was waiting for my response, the spirit didn't seem to be aware of this critical flaw.

"You know I can feel the change in your presence when you switch with Estia, right?"

She groaned in frustration. "Better?"

Well, that was easy. "Better. So, what's the occasion? Why only come out now?" I asked. She'd had many chances before, so I couldn't help but wonder.

"Because I wanted to teach Estia something," she replied. "It's simple, really. I wanted to show her that there are people who would hear the name Spirit of Dusk and not shrink away."

There was pain in her expression. Not for herself, but for Estia. What had brought this on? Why did she trust me enough to tell me this?

“Estia’s emotions,” I said. “It’s not that she hides them on purpose, is it? She’s missing them. There’s something blocking them—something none of us can see.”

“My, the miracles human connection can create. You’re already guessing well,” the spirit commended me. “But you’ve yet to understand just how deep Estia’s darkness runs.”

“You want me to help root it out, don’t you?”

“No,” she said idly. “Her wounds are not ones magic can heal. I only want you to keep her in your thoughts.”

I was silent for a while. “I can’t promise that. Rather, I don’t intend to give her any special treatment. But I can promise that I won’t abandon her.”

The spirit’s expression changed from one of sadness to one of shock, then to a smile. There was a lot about this situation that I didn’t understand, true, and I didn’t expect to be enlightened about any of it. So I simply asked a question.

“All that aside, tell me something. Can an arcanist form pacts with multiple spirits at once? Even without the corresponding magical affinity?”

“It is possible. Difficult, but possible.”

In that case, Estia had great potential. Assuming she wasn’t a double-edged sword.

“I have another question for you,” I said.

“I have an answer.”

“Why did you keep Estia and Lihzalea from meeting at the Kingdom of Dwarves?”

The spirit’s smug expression stiffened. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Come on. Like the Spirit of Dusk wouldn’t notice a source of darkness as strong as her. I thought Lihzalea was the one avoiding us at first, but you were the one keeping her away, weren’t you?”

“Your stupidity really is selective, isn’t it? Your perceptiveness shows at the strangest of times.”

“I try,” I said. “And?”

“Estia was imprisoned with her,” she finally replied. “When we were still trying to escape the empire.”

“Meaning?”

“Estia knows her. But she does not know Estia. Not anymore. Her memories are entirely fabricated.”

“You couldn’t escape with her?”

“Estia wanted to. She tried. But when it came time to leave, Lihzalea’s mind was already gone. Poisoned by drugs and suggestions that my blessing protects Estia from.”

Then was it her? Was it Estia’s desperate attempts to save Lihzalea that had given the girl her strange command over dark magic? That would at least solve one mystery. And it made a lot of sense. If this was a lie, I would never be able to trust a spirit again.

“Can you continue to protect Estia?”

“It’s what I do,” she replied. “And you have my word that I will never raise a hand against you or the Church. I couldn’t do that to Fluna or my sister.”

I simply had to trust her. And hey, it would definitely make life easier.

“I’ll believe you. But know that Estia’s inability to do so herself, to trust others, isn’t something I can help her with. She has to learn to do that on her own.”

“I see. So you’d leave her to suffer alone, hm?”

“That’s not what I said,” I replied. “She’s gotten close to Ketty. She likes Forêt. That’s what I mean. She needs to develop more relationships like those. We can only nudge her along the way.”

“I don’t know.” The spirit wavered.

“Only Estia can fix herself. If you try to create relationships for her, you’ll be

stifling her until there's nothing of her personality left."

The spirit nodded. "Okay." She buried her face into the angel's pillow.

Maybe I'd gotten a little full of myself there. The Illumasian Empire... And here I had thought it was just a country of meatheads like Lionel when it turns out they had their fair share of mad scientists.

I pushed my thoughts away and leaned against the wall in an attempt to fall asleep where I sat. It didn't work. I was so used to my angel's pillow, and the awkward position wasn't doing me any favors.

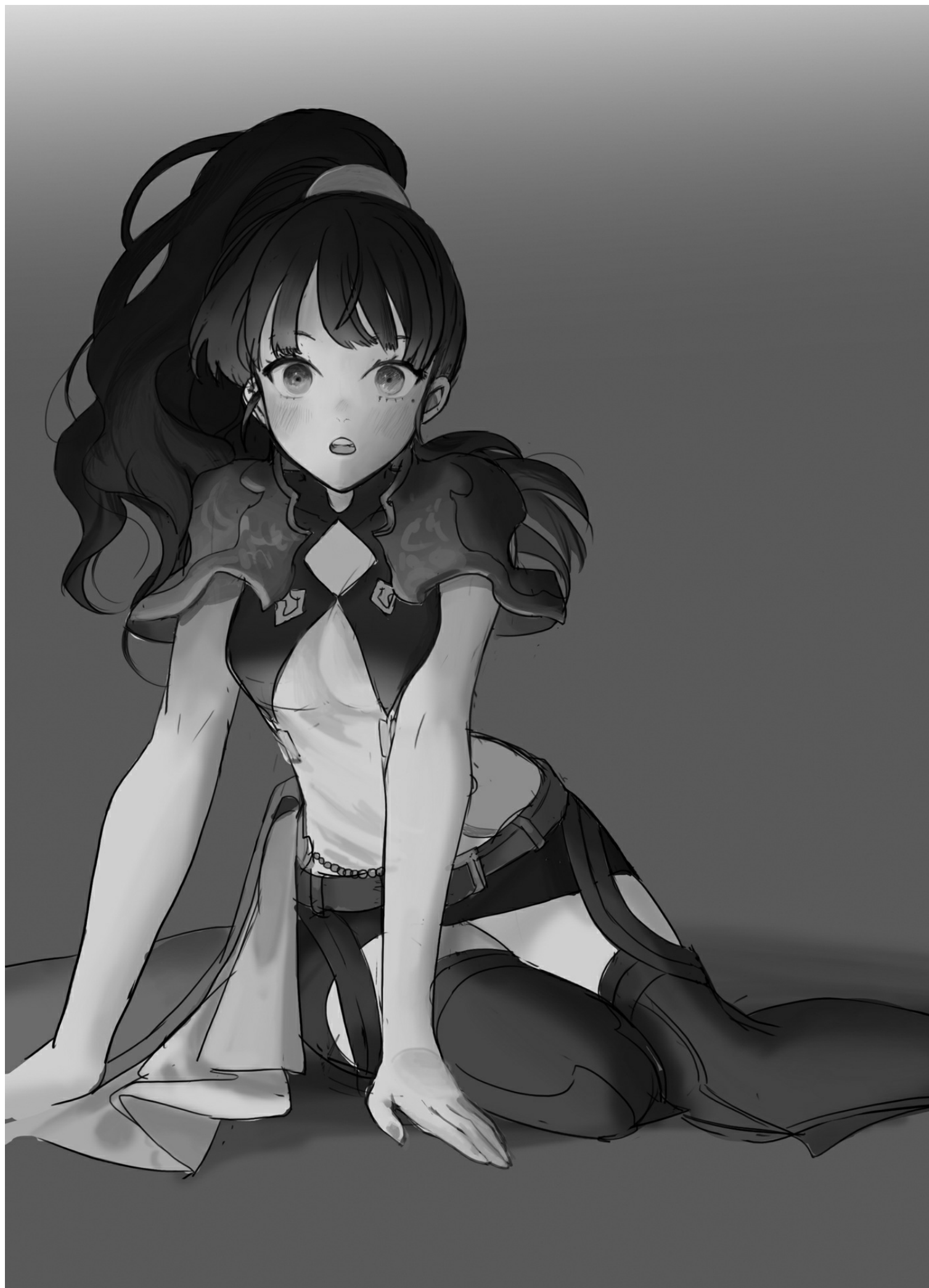
"That's one evil withdrawal side effect," I muttered.

With nothing else to do, I tried to meditate, but the multitude of intrusive thoughts and things to do after the labyrinth made that an impossibility.

At some point, Estia began to stir and opened her eyes.

"Got enough rest?" I asked.

She jumped like a frightened cat and whipped around towards me. I couldn't help but laugh.



“Didn’t you sleep?” she asked.

“Couldn’t stop thinking about everything, so not really.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. Why don’t we have some breakfast?”

“If you think so,” she said.

We had to do something about that passivity of hers.

“You’re allowed to have an opinion, Estia. If you want to eat, we eat. If you don’t, we wait. It’s up to you.”

“I don’t...”

“You should assert yourself more,” I continued. “So we’re going to practice that for the rest of the labyrinth.” I gave a grin that even I thought was a little condescending. “I think it’ll help.”

“Do we eat in here, sir?” she asked.

“We can eat in the hallways, but this is the most secure place.”

“Are you...hungry?” she asked again.

“Could go either way.”

“Then maybe we can have something light and then move on?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

This little experiment was just a shot in the dark—who knew if it’d even lead anywhere—but connecting with people was a complicated business. So I figured we might as well start from step one.

I summoned a table and two chairs from the magic bag as well as some bread, soup, and salad.

“Look good?”

“Your bag is incredible,” Estia said in wonder.

“Sorry, this one’s mine, but maybe we’ll find one for you sometime,” I teased her.

Her reply was a simple and dull, “Yeah.”

Had I just been ignored? My face heated up a little and the mood quickly turned uncomfortable.

After breakfast, we continued into the dungeon.

“The maps from here on will be minimal,” I said. “Be careful and don’t let monsters lead you into any traps.”

“Okay.”

We proceeded smoothly along my old routes and found the staircases relatively easily. This time around there was no barrel of Substance X in my arms, so we had to deal with monsters who became gradually faster and keener the deeper we delved.

“It seems to be going well,” Estia commented.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Last time I was here, I walked around carrying a barrel of Substance X.”

“Substance X? The smelly stuff?” She paused. “Why?”

“Remember how I got trapped for half a year? I was running low on supplies and couldn’t turn back, so I had to dash through these last floors as fast as I could. I used it to avoid fighting and sped to the end.”

“So we’re in uncharted territory from here on, then.”

“Pretty much. Unless you want me to grab a couple barrels?”

There was a moment of hesitation. In that single pause, I could see the calculations being run in her eyes. Substance X or the monsters?

The corner of her eye twitched subtly and she finally decided. “No, thank you. Let’s hurry ahead.”

And there it was. I really didn’t know if all this “teaching” and attention was good for her. All I wanted, for some reason, was for her to learn how to live and enjoy it.

We arrived at the fiftieth floor without incident. No traps, no treasure chests. Estia and I were talking as we proceeded through the hallways, when a group of

monsters appeared.

“Can we win this?” Estia asked. “Or should we maneuver around them?”

Before us were a lich knight, a wight, and a king wraith.

“Still got those nose plugs?” I took out a barrel of Substance X and lifted off the lid in one quick motion.

“It’s worse than I thought,” Estia said, wincing. She had failed to take my advice. “I don’t like it.”

The very thing causing Estia’s pain, however, was our good fortune. The monsters dispersed at once.

“Hey, I warned you. Let’s keep going.” I hoisted up the barrel and started off.

Estia continued to squeeze her nose shut. “I think you could have taken them, though, couldn’t you?”

“Yes, but no,” I answered. “I *could*, but I don’t feel like taking on a lich knight while outnumbered. Our goal here’s to fight as little as possible, so the sooner we beat this labyrinth, the sooner we can ditch the nose plugs.”

“As long as I can walk in front!”

I laughed. “You got it.”

I pointed in the direction we needed to go, and Estia took the lead. I wondered why she wasn’t using the nose plugs I had given her, but the cleansing magic was doing its job, I supposed. And I hadn’t exactly answered her question as to why I had chosen this over fighting.

A shiver squirmed through my body as I remembered the time I had tried casting Extra Heal on the lich knight. The Fire Dragon had been leagues stronger and more imposing, granted, and yet I would have chosen it over a lich knight after a healing spell any day of the week. Easily. The terror I had felt when my hope had turned to despair, when my brilliant idea had only made my opponent into a creature of rage and fury, was not something I cared to experience twice. I could have tried Sanctuary Circle on the trio, but did I want to risk it after my past experiences? No. Not when the way of the pacifist was so much easier.

We continued in silence until, at last, we reached our destination: the boss room. I put away the Substance X and told Estia to get ready before noticing that she was pale and grimacing. I quickly cast Purification and Recover on her.

“Will they come back if we wait here?” she asked.

“The undead come after anything with a beating heart. I’ll let you decide when we go in.”

Estia took a moment and several deep breaths, then looked at me and nodded. “Let’s go.”

I nodded back and cast Area Barrier on the both of us. Then we opened the door.

13 — Knight's Honor, Healer's Pride

I sighed. I was hoping I'd be proven wrong.

Before us were three healers, three templars, and a single paladin. Unfortunately, they were already undead and beyond saving.

"More than expected," I murmured. "Are they conscious, I wonder?"

Despite their corruption, they were in proper formation. Suddenly, one of the red-eyed healers carrying a holy silver sword spoke.

"S-rank Luciel, your coming here has spelled our doom. Our blood is on your hands!"

How was this my fault? And I expected the paladin to be the speaker here, not a healer. Maybe he was the exorcist who had come after me.

"You must be my successor," I said. "And I take it the rest of you don't like me very much, do you? How did you make it this deep?"

"By spending...far too much money. But with the magic item we received, here in this very city, we successfully avoided the labyrinth's ailments."

The proud tone in his voice led me to guess that he must have been the group's leader. Or was he simply the only one still lucid enough to speak?

I began preparing a spell in my head. "You've all been corrupted. Does that mean you've encountered the Wicked One?"

"How do you know that?! You... You must be in league with him! Curse you —" Light emerged from the floor. "What is this effulgence?!"

"Sanctuary Circle," I replied calmly. "I'm going to return your bodies to normal so you can rest in peace."

The spell continued to slowly activate.

"Coward!" the paladin finally shouted. "Know you not the teachings of the Knights of Shurule? Victory is obtained through the crossing of blades!"

The forms of the three healers began to regenerate, necrotic flesh returning

to some semblance of humanity.

The armored paladin was still seething. He wanted to go out fighting, but I only wanted him to meet his final moments as a human. I had to give him that, on my pride as a healer. But he was a knight, and he had his own honor to protect.

“If I don’t stop the corruption, you’ll lose your body, your mind, and ultimately your sense of self, until you eventually become a monster,” I said. “Is that what you want? You want to mindlessly bring harm to your brothers-in-arms?”

What was the point of this? Did the knights really just want to face off with me? Was it some code of honor compelling them to fall at my hands? I was the bane of the undead, after all, and that’s what they were now. Then what...was I to believe the healers wanted to hurl a few spells at me too?

Of course not. What they likely wanted was someone to blame for their fate.

I felt the words come to me, and said, “Fine. Will you die as abominations? Or will you die as men?”

Even I knew I wasn’t sounding like myself. The healers chose silence and soon disintegrated into nothing. But the paladin and the templars chose battle.

“Sir?” Estia prompted me.

“Step back,” I told her. “The victims of my actions are my own responsibility. Signal the start of the match, okay? Nothing else.”

“Yes, sir.”

I filled myself with magic and took the Holy Dragon spear in my left hand and the Illusion Sword in my right. One against four.

“Begin!” Estia announced.

“I am S-rank Luciel, and I will do my duty! I will protect the Holy City!”

I fearlessly charged at the knights, who were wreathed in a black aura, and swung my magically charged sword while thrusting my spear into the center of my target’s armor. There were no feints, no tricks. The spear pierced the enemy’s shield, straight to the armor and beyond. But the undead felt no pain. I

didn't hesitate and cleaved him in half.

The battle continued like this for only a short while before it was over, just like that.

"You got what you wanted," I murmured. "I hope it was worth it."

"Just...like that..." the paladin groaned. There was frustration in his voice but no sadness. He shed no tears.

"Joining the undead lowers your cognitive and physical abilities," I said. "If you had been living, our positions would be reversed."

"Then that is where this sluggishness comes from." He nodded slightly, convinced. "Still, I see now that there are grounds for your rank."

The other knights grieved as they came to understand the end was drawing near.

"I don't want to die."

"Is this how it ends? Powerless? Corrupted?"

"I finally became a templar. And for what?"

"I've been waiting for you to come around," I said finally. "You will at least die as men. I pray that you protect Shurule again in your next life."

I cast Sanctuary Circle one more time, vaporizing them in the pale light. Once they were gone, I went to collect their equipment like they had been any other enemy.

"We'll head back once we get everything, including their magic stones," I said to Estia. "But do not touch the one in the center of the room under any circumstances, or you'll end up like they did."

I suddenly felt my stomach turn. It didn't feel right. This wasn't what I had become a healer for. This wasn't what I had signed up to do.

This wasn't healing.

"Um, sir?" Estia began to say. "Er, never mind."

"Wait for the magic circle. It'll show up soon."

“I...suppose this means we’ve conquered the labyrinth? It’s a good thing this last room was so easy.”

She had no idea. No idea that those men had once been alive, had once served the Church. Or at least, she did a great job of pretending. But I had to be honest—I owed it to the lost souls.

“If we had come here a few decades later and they’d become lich knights or wights, I don’t know if I could have won. And like I said, if this was an even fight, I’d have been the loser.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.” I collected the last stone and the magic circle appeared. “I’m weak.”

I stepped into the circle and cleared the labyrinth.

The next instant, I was back at the start of the dungeon.

“And that’s it,” I said. “We need to see Her Holiness.”

“Oh, finally,” someone in Estia’s voice sighed.

“Why now, of all times?”

I could only hear a single voice, but I could tell that the spirit had switched with her.

“You’re an observant little human, aren’t you? Estia doesn’t like strangers, if you recall, so I’m here to relieve her while traversing the crowds.”

“Convenient. Was it too hard to change back in the labyrinth or something?” I asked.

“No. Now enough of your theories.”

Based on her flustered behavior, I could wager a guess that manifesting in a labyrinth took a considerable amount of energy.

“Whatever you say. Estia was probably tired anyway.”

“I like you better when you’re smart.”

I didn't think it took a genius to figure out I had stressed her out a bit with my mood.

"Let's go."

"Right."

I remembered that I had left Forêt with the pope overnight and hoped that I hadn't breached any rules of etiquette in doing so as we made our way back.

"It's Luciel, Your Holiness. I've come with news."

"Enter."

The attending ladies filed out as the doors opened. I took a knee before the pope and prepared to recount the events of the fiftieth floor.

"Well done on traversing the labyrinth," she commended us. "Both of you. What did you find?"

"The source of the problem was as we thought," I said. "Members of the Church had reached the labyrinth's depths and tampered with the large magic stone, triggering a trap. I believe the Wicked One corrupted them."

"The Wicked One," the pope repeated gravely. "So he really does exist. If only my father were here. He would know what to do."

I could offer no words of consolation. After all, I was thinking the very same thing. Perhaps a hero, or sage, or summoner of some kind on the level of Lord Reinstar could have done something. Perhaps if I could have spoken with him longer... But I decided to let sleeping giants lie for now.

"I'm going to spend the next few days observing the labyrinth to make sure it's weakening. If everything appears safe, I'll be leaving for Merratoni as planned."

"Very well." She frowned. "It will pain me to part with Forêt Noire, but I will be patient until your next visit."

Why was it she couldn't leave these chambers, again? I almost asked but was tactful enough to bite my tongue at the last moment. If it were something I could do anything about, she would have told me by now.

“I know that you have been blessed by the spirits,” she continued. “I will continue to monitor the situation, and you will continue to contact me via arclink when the need arises.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.” I made a mental note to prepare some more honey-related products in the future to raise her spirits. “That concludes my report. Spirit, do you have nothing to say?”

“Fluna,” the spirit said, “my sister is still beyond my reach. But I will find a way to rescue her. You have my word.”

“Thank you,” the pope replied.

Rescue? I hung on that word for a while, but I didn’t pry. It wasn’t my place to butt in.

Forêt licked Her Holiness one last time before approaching and waiting for me to use the hermit key. When I did, she entered with surprisingly little fuss.

“If you’ll ex—” I stopped myself. “Actually, I have a favor to ask, Your Holiness.”

“Oh?”

“I’d like to visit the Adventurer’s Guild tomorrow and offer my services for the day. For one silver per patient.”

“Ah. That holiday of yours.”

“That’s right,” I said. “I think it’s a year overdue. And I’d like to take some time to go back to my roots.”

“I will make an exception for you. However, do remember your place as the author of the guidelines and carry yourself accordingly.”

“Of course. I don’t intend to forget that.”

“Very good,” she said. “I continue to expect great things from you.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.”

When we emerged from the chamber, there were several knights waiting for us.

“What’s this about?” I asked.

“It’s a disaster!” one of them exclaimed. “We have several wounded who need attention! Hurry, to the training grounds!”

Was I the only healer in the whole friggin’ castle?!

It took immense effort not to pull my hair out, but I managed it and hurried after them.

14 — To Be a Leader

The events leading to the knights' desperate need of Luciel took place before he had even conquered the labyrinth. One day prior, Catherine had requested Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin's presence at another training session with the Knights of Shurule. None of them had even had the slightest interest in the offer, but out of consideration for their leader's position, and in the name of not wasting the day sitting around, they accepted.

Now, if only the knights had trained as they were supposed to. But as misfortune would have it, Lionel found several individuals shooting the breeze with each other while the others trained. Although Catherine and a portion of particularly motivated knights were intently focused on their sparring matches, these exceptions reflected poorly on their ranks as a whole. Lionel and Ketty were former military, Kefin had grown up fighting for his life in the slums, and they had all seen the lengths Luciel consistently went to for the good of Shurule. Compared to that, these slackers were downright insulting.

The next day, Catherine requested their attendance once more, but Lionel countered her this time.

"What are your conditions?" she asked.

"I want to cure your knights' overabundance of free time. The Illumasian way."

Catherine had braced herself for the worst, but after a moment of surprise, she accepted. Anything to make them stronger.

"And one other thing," he continued. "Your unit is being dragged down by a few unmotivated individuals. What actions are you taking to rectify this?"

"I'm ashamed to admit it, really. You see, I still don't have the full confidence of all of my subordinates."

"I see."

Lionel suspected that she was being pressured. Or perhaps she simply lacked the resolve necessary to lead. In either case, he decided it was time to test that

resolve as well as filter out the bad eggs within the ranks of the Knights.

I ought to steel myself as well, he thought, for whatever might come and what that might spell for my master.

The next day, the Knights were gathered on the largest of the training fields.

“We will be conducting a series of sparring matches today,” Lionel told them. “Illumasian style. Face the individual next to you. Good. Now fight like your life depends on it. Anything goes, save for strikes to the vitals. When your opponent is defeated, proceed to the next one down the line.”

The knights started to stir, and Catherine looked flustered.

“What...” She faltered. Lionel’s eyes were sharp, his presence strikingly menacing. “But what purpose does that serve?”

“What purpose?” he echoed. “To turn this sorry band of layabouts into something resembling an actual military. The Illumasian way. This is Church Headquarters, so I should think you’d have no shortage of emergency responders. But let me tell you something, Captain. I’m through play-fighting with your wooden swords and shields, and if you disagree with my methods then you’ll have to stop me first. Everyone! Begin!”

Nobody moved. The knights simply stood there, bemused. But Ketty and Kefin knew the drill, and they attacked at once. Caught off guard, their opponents were incapacitated immediately, and the pair then moved straight to the next opponents in line. Lionel drew his sword, his *real* sword, and gestured for Catherine to do the same before engaging her in combat.

They clashed, the metal in their weapons crying out. Lionel’s face was expressionless.

“What are you doing?!” Catherine cried.

“That question again?” he replied. “I should be asking you. What meaning is there in this half-hearted training you do?”

“Meaning? I—”

“Call it a legion or call it a military. There is no difference between a knight and a foot soldier. A unit can not exist without *unity*!”

Catherine grimaced.

“Why do you continue to hesitate?!” Lionel demanded. “While you dither, all you love will be lost! Enough!”

Lionel delivered a sure and mighty blow, launching Catherine through the air. Lumina, watching from a distance, quickly placed herself between the two, sword flashing. Lionel caught her blow.

“Not bad,” he said. “Well? My ears are open.”

“Does Luciel know about this?” Lumina demanded.

Lionel had nothing against her. In fact, he respected her. That was why he had elected to hear her out in the first place, but he had done so expecting something more worth his time.

He sighed. “You should concern yourself less with my master and focus more on your own.”

Lumina’s breath caught in her throat, and with even greater speed than before, Lionel knocked her away in the exact same fashion as Catherine. He then turned and addressed the knights.

“Those so petrified of a wound that they cannot fight! I speak to you! Throw your sword away, leave this place, and never come back! Leave your blade for another with the will to protect, which you so sorely lack! Those with the will, come at me!”

The battles to follow leaned one-sidedly towards Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin. Paladins and templars alike fell to them, until one paladin could take it no more.

“The Knights of Shurule don’t fight like this. All these petty tricks. We fight with honor! Isn’t that right?”

His brothers-in-arms spoke up in agreement, citing chivalry and codes. Dissent filled the air.

After a moment of silence, Lionel replied, “Is that all? Are you satisfied, having delayed your training for a second longer? I ask you again, what is it you think you can protect? *You*? A spoiled band of knights who’ve never seen a single battlefield in their lives. And you talk of fighting with honor? If that’s what you

want, then so be it!”

At that moment, something seemed to emanate from his very being: a powerful, palpable, invisible aura. They could all feel it. Several paladins’ knees buckled, including the dissenters.

“Wh-What point is there in going up against someone like you? Mister Luciel would never—”

The paladin took a hard hit and let out a guttural, pained groan.

“I will hear no excuses,” Lionel stated. “You speak of my master, but what do you know of the dangers and pain he’s experienced? The monsters and enemies he’s faced for the sake of those he holds dear? Nothing. You insult him by invoking his name when you lack the drive to improve, all the while robbing the opportunity from others. Will still no one fight?”

“W-W-Well, you’ve got to teach us,” a knight stammered.

“Y-Yeah! The captains should show us. You can’t expect us to know how this works straight away.”

“What they said!”

“Ah, your captain,” Lionel said. The sorry state of the Knights dredged up foul memories. Memories of puffed-up Illumasian nobles who strutted about the barracks with their shiny badges and ranks, then quickly realized there was no glory to be found in the military before politicking their way out. He very nearly thought to teach them the same lesson himself until he saw Catherine picking herself up off the ground. “Impressive,” he said. “I hardly imagined you’d still be conscious.”

“I’m...” She groaned between heavy breaths. “I’m not...going down...that easily.”

“Good,” he said. “Show me your resolve.”

He set upon her at once but found himself blocked when the knights suddenly hurried to protect her. So, she did have their respect after all, he realized.

He made ready to take them on all at once. He would not hold back. This fight would be real, and it would instill a drive in these soldiers. A drive to be

stronger. And their growth would one day serve his master well.

Meanwhile, Ketty and Kefin engaged in a battle of their own against those bad eggs who had been summarily filtered out.

*

I was brought up to date on the situation as we ran to the training grounds. Apparently, Lionel had picked a fight with the Knights. On the way, I considered how to handle the situation. What would Catherine do? Any healer would heal a friend who needed it, but what if the choice was between them and someone important? Who would I heal first? Which side would I take? My allies in the Knights or my companions, the “important people”? I probably wouldn’t be able to decide. I’d want to leave the choice for Catherine to make, but I couldn’t do that. I had to prepare myself.

When we arrived, I saw a field of casualties, and all of them were knights. Lionel and the others were heavily injured but still standing or at least kneeling.

“They’re safe,” I muttered, relieved.

I approached Lionel and found Catherine on the ground before him. Lumina lay in front of Ketty and Kefin. The sight very nearly made me go faint, but upon closer inspection, my team was clearly worse off than the others.

“Lionel,” I finally called out, “I expect a full explanation for this later.”

He turned around, relief washing over him upon seeing me. “I’m glad you’ve returned, sir. Please see to the others first. I will accept full responsibility once they are safe.”

He didn’t need to tell me twice—Catherine and Lumina were absolutely covered in blood. But he, Ketty, and Kefin were just as bad, if not worse. They seemed close to losing consciousness.

“Everyone gather around,” I said. “I’ll use Area High Heal. Will that be enough, Lionel? Or are there worse injuries?”

“Catherine...” he panted. “She has several fractures.”

High Heal would be sufficient, in that case. I couldn’t believe he was so winded. It must have been the equipment he had been using (their usual

weapons were in my bag), or else he had been overrun. There was no other explanation, considering how much of a disadvantage Catherine was at when it came to Lionel's fighting style.

"I'll use Extra Heal on her just in case. But I'm more worried about all of you."

Ketty and Kefin were silent, barely managing to stay on their feet. I cast Area High Heal, then Extra Heal on those who seemed to need it.

"I've heard the gist of things," I said. "I want details later, but first everyone needs to get some rest. You've all lost too much blood. I'm going to go help the other healers with the knights who can't get up. Was anyone dismembered?"

"I do not recall having needed to do that," Lionel said.

"We weren't *that* mean," added Ketty.

"No one put up enough of a fight that we needed to go lopping off anyone's limbs," Kefin explained.

They were awfully calm about having nearly wiped out the Knights of Shurule. But it couldn't have been that malicious. When I had observed the knights for the first time, I had at least felt some semblance of motivation from them, but that was when *I* was there. And Lionel's presence had still been new and exciting.

Extra Heal could regenerate lost blood, but I had a bad feeling about having my team wandering around right now, so I had them continue to rest. I could sense a strong aura of contempt coming from them, which was directed at the knights, their eyes filled with a disdain that not even *I* had experienced before. They had never been this harsh with the Order of Healing. Were the Knights *that* pitiful? Was their training just offensively, pointlessly easygoing? Had they egged my team on while my back was turned?

Nearly half of the knights had been launched all the way to the outer wall, including some of the Valkyries, the very strongest that Shurule had to offer. None of the girls were heavily injured, but seeing them on the ground, defeated, was sobering.

Was this weakness the source of my team's scorn? It couldn't be. If weakness offended them, then I—or the Order, for that matter—would have earned their

ire long ago. The only logical conclusion I could reach was that the knights, blessed with powerful classes, had lost their nerve and decided to rest on their laurels.

Regardless, as their leader, I needed to be ready to deal with the consequences of the trio's actions. I continued to heal the knights, but without much help. Although there were a few other healers present, most of them were pale and suffering from magical exhaustion.

Once everyone was healed, I asked for the specifics of what had transpired, and although they thanked me for my help, no one dared speak a word. I returned to the center of the field, where Estia was talking with the others.

"Figuring out what happened?" I asked her.

"Yes, sir," she replied. "And letting them know that I'll be joining you all on your trip to Merratoni."

"Good. Everyone, Estia's officially part of the group from now on."

"She'll surely prove more useful than any of the knights here," Lionel said.

"She's a strong kitty," Ketty commented. "Bet she actually knows how to train too."

"There's no way she's stronger than me," Kefin added, "but she definitely has better judgment on the battlefield."

Those compliments were pretty backhanded. Towards the Knights in particular. It wasn't like them to get this upset.

"Not stronger than you, huh? Wanna test that?" Ketty challenged him.

"One more word. I dare you," he shot back.

"Or what?"

I ignored their bickering.

"You'll find out one of these days," Kefin warned her.

"Ohhh, scary," Ketty teased him back.

I was glad that the two had grown so close since leaving Yenice, but there were more important matters than enjoying the show. I turned to Catherine

and Lumina, who had been healed but were still incapacitated. They had regained their senses a short while ago.

“I apologize for my subordinates,” I told them. “I have no idea how this got so out of hand, but I’m very sorry that it did.”

“Did you order them to do this?” Lumina asked.

I wasn’t sure what she was getting at, but then I remembered something. “Her Holiness sent me on a mission. So I told them to join you for training while I was gone and to whip the knights into shape if they thought it necessary. I suppose that last part might have had something to do with it.”

“That explains it.” She turned away and fell silent.

Lionel and the others said nothing, waiting quietly for my instructions. When taken in the context of my own orders, it became evident that Lionel had done exactly that. But he wouldn’t have done so without a reason.

“Whatever my team did to the Knights was a direct result of my own words. These guys don’t act for their own gain. This is my responsibility.”

“Luciel,” Catherine finally murmured, “are my knights weak?”

She sounded pleading. So I decided to be blunt. “Here’s what I’ll tell you,” I said. “The drills I observed the other day? I was honestly surprised by how much they improved in only two years with you as their captain. But I have to judge them based on actual threats, on the things I experienced during my time away. And if the empire invaded today, I don’t think they’d stand a chance.”

I was surprised by the harshness of my words. And it seems I had surprised Lumina and Catherine as well, going by their expressions. They were looking downcast. Perhaps it was their first time hearing the truth, or perhaps I had only confirmed what they already knew.

“What if...” Catherine began to put the unthinkable into words. “Luciel, what if you led the Knights instead?”

It seemed I had finally broken what little pride she had left as captain of the guard. Lumina’s jaw dropped, and she stared at the despondent captain with wide eyes. If I didn’t put a stop to this right now, the Knights of Shurule would

suffer horribly for it. And yet, as shaken as Catherine surely was, her words were something I never wanted to hear, not even in my worst nightmares. The undead men from the labyrinth flashed through my mind.

“Catherine. What made you want to become a knight?” I asked.

She said nothing.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I continued. “I’m an S-rank healer, and even if my achievements were all products of luck and circumstance, they’re still something to be proud of. Heck, maybe I even look like I know what I’m doing sometimes. So that makes me perfect for the job, is that it?”

Catherine remained silent. Lumina observed her closely, looking for any change in her expression. I knew Catherine hadn’t really meant what she said; she couldn’t have.

“If that’s what you think, then great. We can make this quick, and you can retire,” I told her. “You can throw it all away, and your legacy will be a spoiled, whining bunch of soldiers. I’ll do better. I’ll start from scratch, go find a bunch of determined warriors, fund the whole thing, and call it a day. Wouldn’t that be great?” I felt sharp and disdainful gazes prodding me from all around. I raised my voice and addressed them. “What? Am I wrong? Speak up, then, if you have something to say.”

No one spoke. Of course they didn’t. The Knights of Shurule were meant to be protectors, not aggressors.

“Captain Catherine, look around you,” I went on. “*These* are the Knights of Shurule. A bunch of selfish, privileged, and entitled children who think the world owes them everything, just as it owed them the great classes they were blessed with.”

“I don’t—”

“Listen to me. I don’t want to lead these people. Who would, when they don’t even want to be led?”

“That’s not true,” she argued.

“Catherine, you yourself just tried to give up.”

“I-I wasn’t...”

I knew that I was exaggerating, of course. But I had to get her to realize something. I needed her to stand up for herself here and now or the Knights were through.

“I’m sorry for pushing you like this. But you know you’re the only one for the job. No one else has your presence, your ability to lead according to each and every individual’s strengths and weaknesses, your understanding of what it takes to lead a unit. No one is as respected or as honorable as you. *No one* has your resolve.”

“If only that were true,” she berated herself.

“I know you struggle with cohesion and making the Knights feel like a team, but not even Lumina is perfect. Nor are any of the other seven regiment captains, for that matter.”

“But even Lumina would make a fine guard captain,” she protested.

True, Lumina was indeed the stronger of the two, and she had a much firmer hold on her regiment—yet another element that fed into Catherine’s drastic loss in confidence.

“You’re right,” I said. “Lumina is without question the strongest person in the legion, and the Valkyries are the best regiment you have.”

“Exactly.”

“But that’s why she can’t be captain of the guard. She’s young, inexperienced. She would rely too heavily on her own team and neglect the others.” No response. “What was the point of being reinstated if you’re just going to quit now? What about all the trust Her Holiness has placed in you?” More than anything, I had to get her to regain her confidence.

“Trust?”

“If I were to become captain of the guard, there would be daily Substance X, grueling training sessions, and mandatory field exercises with monsters. I’d scare everyone away in the first week.”

Catherine’s expression softened at my joke. “You’ve got me there. I’m sorry.”

I had learned something during my time in Yenice, and I figured it would do her good if I shared it.

“You know something,” I said, “I don’t think greatness or strength has anything to do with being a good leader. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be one.”

She frowned, but only for a moment. “That goes for me too, doesn’t it?”

“I may not exactly be seasoned, but I do have *some* experience to speak from. All the stories you hear about my successes barely scratch the surface. You don’t hear about the struggles or about the people who helped me along the way. My powerlessness still eats at me if I let it. I wish I could be the Lord Reinstar everyone expects me to be, but I’m not. I never will be.”

Be it in Shurule or Yenice, the Holy City or Merratoni, I was never alone. There was always someone better than me, and I had to rely on them. But that didn’t make me a lesser person. I never ran from my rank or responsibilities because of it.

“I’m not going to force you to continue doing something you don’t want to do,” I continued. “It’s your right to quit if that’s what you really want. But just know that without you, things would fall apart. Corruption will creep back into the regiments. I can say that with absolute certainty.”

She frowned. I understood why. I understood what she was going through. Back when the honeyworks had been exposed in Yenice, and even with the school, I had been so focused on the results. It didn’t need to be me leading any of it. What mattered was that it was getting done.

But I remembered what the vespian prince, Honeur, had once talked to me about. It was *because* it was me, because I had been at the helm, that people were drawn to me. It couldn’t be just anybody. And really, wasn’t that what being a good leader was all about?

Catherine was in that same rut. And I owed her and Lumina, my friends, too much to let them continue to suffer in it.

“I don’t want you to give up,” I said. “I don’t want you to even joke about it.” She furrowed her brow in thought, her mind still a mess. “Also, for the record, whether or not you think you have charisma, never forget that we respect you.

In case you didn't notice, you're popular enough to turn an entire joint bout in your favor."

"What?" she asked.

"Come on, you know Lumina should have won during the drills. But she didn't. The templars did. The templars *you* led."

"I'm really not following you."

"The Knights didn't want to see you lose, Catherine. They wouldn't let you."

"What? Why? Lumina, what is he talking about?"

Lumina flinched. "Er..."

Maybe it was a little cruel of me to let the proverbial cat out of the bag, but I couldn't believe Catherine really hadn't noticed. She was usually so observant.

Lumina took a deep breath, then said, "The Knights of Shurule are stronger as one than the sum of its parts. They are a shield, not a sword. That's what you taught me when I first enlisted, Lady Catherine. I act not for myself, but for the whole."

"So did you hold back or not?" Catherine asked. "Did you let me win?"

"I think what she means to say is you're the glue that holds the Knights together," I told her.

She scoffed. "Well, some leader I am. I need my subordinates to throw matches for the sake of keeping the whole guard from falling apart, because evidently, I can't do it myself." She sighed and slumped her shoulders. She really wasn't taking this how she was supposed to. It felt bad to admit it, but I was losing my patience a little.

"Lady Catherine," Lumina said as I pondered the situation. "Do you remember the knights who joined Luciel's Order of Healing?"

"Of course."

"Do you think it was Luciel's strength or charisma that drew them to his cause? I do not. I think it was what he stood for. His aspirations. They wanted to save lives, just as he did. The Knights of Shurule are much the same."

“Exactly,” I agreed. “*You’re* what holds everything together. It’s not about some title or position. It’s about the person behind it. And I’m sure every knight here would agree with me.”

Catherine looked thoughtful. “The person behind it.”

“All the job really entails is being able to converse with the eight regiment captains, right? Talk and keep them in line. That’s what the position is really about.”

In Yenice, most of my communication had been with others in the upper echelons of their bureaucracy. My talks with anyone else had been simple and courteous but nothing more. And yet, the operation hadn’t been an utter disaster. Why? Because I had communicated clearly and regularly with the people below me, who had then done the same to those below them.

“Precisely,” Lionel said, finally speaking up. “It’s how an organization functions. From leader to sub-leaders to the most basic constituents of the unit. It is not your duty to go out of your way to disrupt the chain. However, every organization has its weeds, those who will go against your authority. Much like those I discovered myself who sow apathy within your group with their own lethargy.”

Lionel had deduced far more than me, as usual. I couldn’t help but think his words were meant for me as much as they were for Catherine.

“I don’t think there’s any need for you to be on the ground during these joint drills,” I said. “As captain, I think you should be watching from above, figuratively speaking, and attempting to rectify problems that catch your eye, not worrying yourself about every little thing you can do to help every single knight.”

“You mean I’ve been overburdening myself,” Catherine replied.

“Yes. There are very few jobs that the pope places so much of her trust in, so you owe it to her to do it right. Maybe not every single knight is going to like you, but they’re not worth more of your attention than the people who appreciate you.”

“You think too much,” Lionel said. “Open yourself to others. Rely on them.

That is how you create firm relationships.”

It seemed I had successfully averted a future as the captain of the Knights of Shurule. Had I added that nightmare to my list of anxieties, it would have been the death of me. Plus, the whole reason I had run away from Yenice was to get away from all the bloodshed and fighting. A bit of peace and quiet would have been nice.

“It sounds like I have some thinking to do about how I’ve been running things,” Catherine murmured. “Lumina, I’m sorry for causing this mess, but I hope you’ll still stand with me.”

Lumina saluted. “Forever and always.”

They smiled at each other. All’s well that ends well. Catherine had been carrying an immense burden all on her own. She had stepped down from her position once before, and that combined with her overactive thoughts must have put her in a really bad place. But at least the guard still had its captain.

“We need to hold a forum with all of the knights,” Catherine thought aloud. “I’ll need to rethink how we hold our joint exercises. Thank you, everyone.”

“I’m glad we could help,” I said. “I should apologize for talking down to you. As for the joint exercises, take my impressions with a grain of salt.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m grateful for your opinion.”

“Long story short, be more confident in yourself.”

She gave me a smile, at last unclouded. “Thank you, Luciel.”

I still needed to hear just what in the world Lionel had done to spark all this when we had a chance. But before my thoughts went any further, Catherine approached me with a warm grin and planted a kiss on my cheek.

I calmly returned her smile with my own. “Don’t mention it.”

Little did she know, I had just recently had some Substance X. I was utterly unaffected. Had the circumstances been different, however, I would have been very much affected.

“Playing tough, hm?”

“More than playing,” I joked. “I am happy, though. I think anyone would be to get a kiss from someone as beautiful as you.” I had just turned forty in my previous life. What forty-year-old got flustered by a little peck on the cheek? Not this one.

“Oh, Lumina?” Catherine called. “Come here, would you?”

“Yes, ma’am?” Lumina replied.

“Would you please give our dear Luciel a thank-you kiss for me? He’s not being any fun.”

Wait, why Lumina? Also, I was at least ninety-percent sure that constituted sexual harassment by a superior.

“You can’t just order someone to ki—”



“She didn’t need to.” Her cheeks were flushed. “I’ve been meaning to thank you as well.”

Something sweet tickled my nose, and something soft lingered on my lips. My heart beat with an intensity I had never felt in my life. If this was what they called “honey trapping,” then suddenly I understood this world’s fascination with the stuff. I might have been over forty mentally, but physically I was in my twenties. I felt like I was going to explode.

“Yes, well. You too.” I shot my head down in an awkward bow. “Thank you. For the kiss, I mean.”

This was my downfall. There was an entire legion of knights present to witness my display, and my act would become the subject of laughter among them for days to come. Even the Valkyries would join in on the teasing. And my team would simply leave me to die.

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Catherine watched Luciel succumb to his fate as the new target of their bullying, and she thought back on her own actions. On the things she had done since being reinstated as captain of the guard.

To her, the Knights of Shurule were a shield, the best the nation had to offer, ready to give their lives to defend their country. It was in order to live up to those expectations that she had so single-mindedly striven to become stronger, and her efforts had been rewarded. Catherine had become the strongest and earned her place as captain of the guard.

But physical strength was not all it took to be a leader. Crushed by that realization, she had given up her duty, and yet she eventually returned. Everything changed with the Valkyries. Specifically, her de facto pupil, Lumina, usurping Catherine’s title as the strongest and becoming a regiment captain.

There were many who didn’t like Lumina’s rise to prominence, and she became subject to abuse, indirect or otherwise. Catherine saw her burdened with unbecoming busywork, hammered down like the protruding nail she was, and she saw herself in her.

Then Luciel came along. Suddenly, everyone was too busy trying to subvert

him, and all the while he was none the wiser, always too deep in the labyrinth to even notice. And then he started joining the Valkyries' training sessions, and it spurred others, who couldn't stand to see a healer outdo them, to action. But when he finally vanquished the labyrinth and became an S-rank, Catherine could see the knights' motivation drain before her eyes. *That* was what had inspired her to return to her duties. To endeavor to return the Knights of Shurule to the glory of her younger days. However, this time her efforts were for naught.

Meanwhile, Luciel was making waves in Yenice.

So Catherine held talks with the regiment captains, desperate to find a way to turn things around. But the fissures only deepened when the primary source of feedback she received came from Lumina alone.

Now, she realized where she had gone wrong. She had spent too much time comparing herself to Luciel and not enough time relying on her subordinates. The next day, Catherine gathered the Knights, lowered her head, and offered her deepest apologies for her behavior. She also made a request: assistance. She asked for their support in truly becoming Shurule's shield—a force of elites to be proud of.

From that day on, everything started to change again.

15 — In the Spotlight

I sought refuge from the endless teasing at the Adventurer's Guild. Prior to that, though, I had asked Rosa to escort me back to Anna's clothing store, where I acquired some new garments. Together, these two things had utterly sapped my energy.

I plopped myself down at the counter in the guild's dining hall and heaved a dramatic sigh.

"You're ruinin' the ambience, kid," the guildmaster said. "What's got our Saint all down in the dumps, eh?"

"Have you ever been kissed before?" I asked. "Like, unexpectedly?"

I heard several things fall and shatter behind him. It was the vice guildmaster, Milty. Her eyes met mine and her cheeks burned red. She hurriedly bent down and gathered up the broken pieces in an instant before fleeing into the kitchen.

"Did I do that?" I asked. "Wait, don't tell me. Are you two..."

"Zip it. Don't you mind her."

Fair enough. I sighed again.

"Well, what in the hell is it?" Grantz asked impatiently.

"Well, there's this girl. And she kissed me. But it was just as a thank-you, you know? And I mean, I've never even thought of her in that way until now. I didn't even know she thought of *me* in that way until now. And there were all these people there, and it turned into this huge fuss."

Grantz set a cup of hot tea in front of me. I took a sip.

"So, the bonehead's got a lady. Sounds like you don't got much to worry about." He patted my shoulder with a grin. "Was startin' to wonder about you."

"Am I that dense? I had no idea."

How was I supposed to know about this stuff? I was too busy trying to figure out how to survive to get in touch with my emotions.

Wait, if I'd been too dull to notice anything all this time, did that mean someone might've actually...*liked* me? And I just never noticed?

Nah, no way. Like I was some casanova. Okay, now I was just getting depressed.

"Do ya like the girl?" Grantz asked.

That was the question, wasn't it? Lumina was definitely beautiful and proud, and graceful. And man, her smile. But did I *like* like her? I had never even entertained the idea.

"Of course I like her," I said. "I just don't know if I like her, well, like *that*. She's always just been someone I respect and look up to. And I don't want to let this kiss get my feelings all confused." Of that, at least, I was certain.

"Guess healin' doesn't prepare ya for dealing with the ladies, eh? If you don't got your feelings sorted out yet, just keep bein' yourself. What's so complicated?"

"When is it *not* complicated?"

If I just went off to Merratoni, it'd look like I was running away. But if I confronted Lumina, it would cause a scene. Really, what I wanted to do was scream at the top of a mountain and curse these children for losing their heads over a little thank-you kiss, but could I really blame them? I had been *kissed*. Right in front of them all.

If you had put a gun to my head and asked if I were attracted to Lumina romantically right that second, I probably would have said no. But who could say in a few months? My heart started to pound in my chest before calming down soon after, likely due to Substance X.

Come to think of it...I hadn't felt much of anything when Catherine had kissed me. And then there were the two women related to the dragons and spirits who I was supposed to meet. What if that meant I was supposed to meet my soulmate in the same way?

Regardless of how amazing and great Lumina was, though, I didn't quite feel the same way I had about my love interest back in my first life. Actually, hadn't I felt a similar way towards Nanaella and Monica?

“If being confused means I’m in love, and I feel like this towards multiple people, does that make me philanderous?” I wondered to myself. “Somehow I doubt Grantz would understand if I bring any of this up.”

“You just did, Luciel.”

“Hm? Did I say that out loud?”

“From somethin’ about being confused to the part where you made some real bold assumptions about me.”

“Er. Sorry.”

What was I getting myself all tied up over? These were my own feelings. I had nothing to feel guilty about. Maybe it wouldn’t have been a problem if I had avoided the kiss entirely, but I surely would have hurt Lumina in the process. Not that I could have dodged it in the first place...or would have wanted to.

“Whatever.” Grantz changed the subject. “So why’re ya here?”

“A bit of a change of pace. I got permission from the pope to hold another Saint Weirdo’s Day.”

“Thought so. No way you showed up just to chat about girls all day. Lemme know when you’re done. Got some new recipes for ya.”

“Thanks, I will.”

I still hadn’t even gotten through the recipes I already had, but I wasn’t going to say no. I enjoyed cooking.

“I’ll getcha your patients. Head on downstairs.”

“Will do.”

I made my way to the guildhall’s training grounds.

Many people had gathered for the long-overdue holiday. Not just those suffering from wounds but also minor cases like achy joints or back pain. I saw to every last one of them, occasionally several at a time.

When I finally found time to breathe, I realized my team had shown up at some point.

“When did you guys get here?” I asked.

Lionel grinned. “When you opened up to the guildmaster about your romantic struggles.”

“I don’t like that it took me this long to notice.”

“You were being awfully absent-minded.”

“Yeah, chin up,” Ketty said. “You know people tease you ’cause it’s fun to watch you pout, right?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked. The way she put it sounded like Lumina was already free from the torment.

“They’ll be talking about the kiss the Church’s top healer and paladin shared for ages, but no one’s giving Lumina a hard time anymore,” Kefin explained.

“Why not?”

He shook his head. “Said it was ‘just a thank-you kiss’...in a way that made it pretty clear anyone who put her in a bad mood was going to regret it.”

Did that make Lumina manlier than me, or me girlier than Lumina? “Then why am I still getting it?” I demanded.

“You’re young and the opposite of intimidating,” said Ketty.

Oh, so they were looking down on me. Got it.

“This is bullying,” I announced.

“I don’t think they mean bad by it. It means they like you,” Kefin added. “But you do make it easy.”

“Why am I being told this *now*?”

“Well, that’s just the way I see it. And I was...held up a little.”

That meant Lionel and Ketty.

I seriously needed some time to sort my thoughts out. Lesson learned: I needed to be more aware of the fact that people were always watching me. They had seen my vulnerability in that kiss. I wasn’t so sure about Kefin’s theory that this meant they liked me, though, so I suppose that meant I had more work

to do if I wanted to come across with some semblance of authority in the future.

“Anyway, we’re going to Merratoni tomorrow,” I said.

The three asked no questions and obeyed. Then Grantz came asking for me. Mappulo and Jabrone had heard that I was at the guild and brought over a document with a plan for their transportation company.

At a glance, it was definitely optimistic but clearly thought out. I approved their proposal on one condition: they would regularly practice self-defense at the Adventurer’s Guild training grounds. They agreed, I bound them to a contract stating that they would conduct business for the good of the people, and then I gave them an investment to get started. Whether or not I saw any returns on it wasn’t as important to me as them doing some good.

After lunch in the mess hall, I dismissed everyone until evening. Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin killed the time by training with the adventurers, though they never took their eyes totally off me.

“You guys really fit in around here,” I remarked.

“We used to make fun of the adventuring lifestyle in the past,” Ketty admitted. “Didn’t really fit with the military life we were used to. But I’m starting to think it’s not so bad.”

“I’m glad. I need to go somewhere, so it’s about time we leave.”

“One sec.”

She bounded away to fetch Lionel and Kefin.

“Not bad, huh?” I murmured. “Yeah. It’s not so bad living in Shurule.”

I found myself wondering yet again if those three really belonged with me.

We were on our way out to visit a magic item shop and that restaurant in the slums when Grantz caught us and handed me the recipes.

“Forgot somethin’,” he said. He cracked a smile, revealing a warmth underneath his gruff exterior. “Nothin’ like cooking to take your mind off your troubles.”

“You’re really popular with old men, sir,” a voice suddenly said.

I jumped. “Whoa! Estia! Scared the hell out of me. Where’d you come from?”

“Um, I’ve been here the whole time,” she said. “I’ve been watching from a nice corner ever since that lady broke the plates at the bar.”

If anyone else had told that to me, I would have called them a stalker.

“She arrived at the guildhall with us,” Lionel said, confused by my shock.

Well, I sure as hell hadn’t noticed her. Was the Spirit of Dusk to blame? Or did she have some kind of presence-concealing skill? On that note, where in the world had she been the whole time?

“She was with you?” I asked. “I never even saw her.”

“I was hiding,” Estia replied. “It was very boring, though. There were no assassins.”

I wasn’t sure if I was ready to rule Estia out as an assassin herself, although Ketty already covered that role well enough on her own, thank you very much. Galba could probably have refined her skills into something terrifying.

“Well, thanks,” I said. “Wait, assassins? Why would there be assassins?”

“There might have been,” she corrected me.

If I were speaking with the spirit right now, I’d have a few questions, but alas.

“Please protect me in a less creepy manner going forward.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Grantz, I’ll be back to visit in a few months,” I told him.

“You, uh...hang in there, pal,” he replied.

“As always.”

I exited the Adventurer’s Guild, hoping Rina’s magic item shop might have some neat new products to improve my exhausted mood.

16 — The Illumasian Reincarnation

A girl named Rina ran the store we were heading to, and I was reasonably certain that she had been reincarnated like me. But when we arrived, the store was gone.

The Holy City placed duties on its businesses, but not paying them was only grounds for repossession, not closing the shop entirely. And she hadn't been hurting for profits even before I had come into the picture, meaning there had to be some other reason she wasn't there.

"This is where it used to be," I muttered.

Kefin immediately went to gather information and returned a few minutes later.

"Seems she moved in order to expand," he reported. "She's still in the city. I can take us there."

"Good work. But what's with the grin?"

All he had done, as far as I knew, was talk to a few people. I'd never seen him smile this widely before.

"I grew up being taught that no one would accept a beastperson in the Holy City," he said, "much less a half-beast. I thought I would make things difficult by being with you, sir." That was true; I had heard much the same myself. "But everyone's treated me normally, even before I tell them that I'm with you. They're so welcoming."

I'd had no idea he'd been concerned about that. There I went being a bonehead again.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think about any of that," I admitted. "I'm glad you aren't being discriminated against."

"Don't apologize, sir. I'm sure you're the reason everyone's being so accepting in the first place."

"That'd be nice."

I noticed Ketty grinning as well. Kefin's positivity was working wonders on all of us. He guided us away from the slums and through the city to a corner on the main street. It was definitely the place to be if someone wanted to attract customers with fat wallets.

"This is the place," he announced.

"It's almost twice as big as the last one," I commented. "Definitely a lot nicer, but it looks like she didn't do much remodeling."

It seemed my investments had paid off. It made me happy to think my help had something to do with the upgrade.

Lionel entered the store first and immediately flinched, taking a defensive stance. Inside was the same talking golem that had greeted me on my first visit.

"Whoa there," I said. "That was at the first shop too. Well, it wasn't this pretty at the time."

"WELCOME TO COMMEDIA ARTIFACTS," the robotic construct said.

At a glance, the store's stock had grown considerably in both diversity and quantity.

"Welcome to Commedia Artifacts!" a voice echoed from near the back. An employee, busy assisting another customer. There were a few other guests browsing around as well.

"Business is definitely booming," I remarked. "By the way, this is where I get pretty much all of my magic items, like my magic stove."

Lionel hummed with interest. "Perhaps we'll uncover something unique."

"Or something Pola or Lycian might be able to whip up," Ketty added.

"Let me know if anything catches your eye, and we can pick it up," I told them.

"Yes, sir," all four said at once. In the middle of the store. Awkward.

We perused the shop's items curiously, and the employee who had called out earlier approached us before long.

"Can I help you find anything?" she asked.

“Actually, is your boss in? Rina, I believe her name is.”

Her expression hardened a bit. Poor human relations?

“Rina? You want to see Rina?”

I kept my smile up. “Yes, ma’am. I have business with her.”

“One moment, please.”

The woman shot me a questioning glance before disappearing through a door meant for employees.

“Business?” Lionel asked.

“Yeah, just have a few questions. It’s nothing dangerous, don’t worry.”

A moment later, the woman returned with a girl wearing glasses—Rina. She wore a white coat and her hair rested on her shoulders.

“Hello, can I help you with something?” she asked. She took a good look at me. “Hey, aren’t you that church fellow who nearly bought me dry a few years ago?”



“That’s me,” I answered. “I’ve been out of town for the last year, so I wanted to come see what new stuff you had. It took me a while to find the place, though.”

“Oh, yeah. We scaled up a bit. You really put us on the map.”

She had seemed on guard at first, like she had been expecting someone else, but her demeanor was calm now.

“Pardon if I’m prying too much,” —I dropped my smile— “but I’m not the first visitor you’ve had from the Church, am I?”

I had a hunch the corrupted knights and healers from the labyrinth had shopped here.

“No,” Rina admitted. “No, you aren’t. But you’re definitely one of the nicer ones. I learned that lesson pretty fast.”

What in the world had they done? Had they threatened her? Shaken her down?

“I’m sorry.” I bowed. “I apologize if they’ve done anything untoward to you.”

“C-Come on now, raise your head,” she insisted. “I feel like your friends are about to kill me.”

I sensed a menacing aura emanating from behind me. They were probably enraged by the members of the Church who had just forced me to humble myself, but that was hardly the store’s fault. On the other hand, though, I was a little glad that someone was mad, because if it hadn’t been them, it would’ve been me. At least my apology had smoothed things over somewhat, and telling the others to relax helped me to earn more of Rina’s trust too. I needed to report this information to the pope later.

“Apologies again. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” I said, hoping to move the conversation towards my reason for being there, but Rina beat me to it.

“So, you have business with me?”

“I’d like you to give me a rundown of your newest inventions. Or I’ll take a pamphlet if you have any.” I took out a small ring. “I also want to hear what you

know about this.”

Rina looked at it and thought for a while. “How high up in the Church are you?”

“Well, I can meet with the pope without an appointment, so fairly high.”

“My master serves no one but Her Holiness,” Lionel boasted. “No other surpasses his rank.”

“In that case...” Rina fiddled with her glasses. “I have a favor to ask.”

I wondered if maybe those things had some sort of lie detector functionality. In any case, she sure had guts to stand up to Lionel directly. Anyone else would have at least flinched.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I just want to make sure those men never come back here,” she said. She looked genuinely uneasy. “I don’t particularly like being threatened into doing my work.”

She didn’t have to worry about that, at least. They had already parted from this world. But a person would normally become public enemy number one for pulling a stunt like that. I could see why she wanted to ensure her safety.

“That can be arranged. In return—I mean, not that I’m asking for anything in return specifically—can you tell me what this ring is?”

“It uses the wearer’s mana to protect them from ailments,” she explained. “But it’s still a prototype. Several were stolen from me.”

“Well, that’s not good.” I gave three of the rings back to her, keeping four for myself.

“I can have them back?”

“Of course. Now, I’d like to hear about your new products.”

“Yes, right. Where should I start?”

“Anywhere. I’m buying anything that sounds useful today, so show me everything.”

Rina exchanged glances with the other woman, both of them grinning. “Thank

you for your patronage,” Rina said excitedly. “Now, let’s begin with...”

But before she could get started, I remembered something. “Oh, that reminds me. Did you ever complete those glasses that can use appraisal skills?”

“Unfortunately not. That project still needs a bit more elbow grease.”

“Too bad. It sounds handy. Anyway, sorry for interrupting.”

She resumed her pitch, and I proceeded to judge the items one by one, deciding if they were worth purchasing. As we placed our orders with the employee, one person in particular seemed to be positively exhilarated by the experience: Estia. She was always the one with her nose closest to each item, asking the most questions. You wouldn’t have believed she was the same timid girl as before. And then, right as we were wrapping up, her excitement reached its peak and she asked a single innocent question.

“I knew it! I’ve heard of all these things!” Estia exclaimed. “Rina, are you from another world? One of those reincarnated people?”

It was like a bomb had gone off. Rina went dead quiet.

“I met Alice in the empire about five or six years ago,” Estia continued, “and she said she was reincarnated into a whole different body.”

Rina’s face had turned pale. “Where...” Her voice shook. “Where is she now?”

“The empire...killed her,” Estia said. “She protected me.”

Rina and I weren’t the only ones stunned into silence. Lionel and Ketty, who had been with the empire all that time ago, didn’t hide their shock.

And just like that, the secret of reincarnation was out of the bag. But why hadn’t the empire made use of that information? They surely had the money and resources.

“So she’s dead,” Rina murmured despondently.

“Alice taught me about all sorts of things,” Estia said. “Like flying birds made of steel and boxes filled with more information than you can imagine. A lot of your stuff reminded me of the things she told me about, so I thought you might be like her.”

Planes and computers. Hearing about another reincarnated person's death shook me pretty hard. Rina was no exception. I could see her trembling.

"Maybe," said Rina. "Maybe I am. But what does that matter? What does it matter to you where I come from?"

I was right there with her. This was a massive thing to reveal, so Estia had surely done it for a reason.

"Alice taught me that there are a lot of books and stories in her world," Estia explained, "and that some of them are about 'brolationships' and forbidden love between men. She called it 'the way of the world.'"

All at once, the tension in the air evaporated. Alice, evidently, had been quite the well-read individual...of a very particular genre. Now I'd seen everything.

"I was just a little curious about these...ways of the world," Estia went on.

"I...think that's a bit of an exaggeration," said Rina.

I was in full agreement. Now I knew where Lihzalea had gotten her information from.

"Oh," said Estia, a bit disappointed.

"I mean, *some* people are into that sort of thing, I guess."

"I see. Then what about the steel birds? Or the horseless carriages? Could you make those? Do you think you could do it?"

She was flipping back and forth like a light switch. Did she not know that Rina would have to admit she'd been reincarnated just to answer that question? I couldn't tell if Estia was an airhead or an exceptional actor.

"I don't know, but they're interesting ideas."

"You haven't tried yet?"

"I'm really not skilled enough to make anything like that, and where would I get the materials for any of it? You're talking fairy tales."

Suddenly, I had a thought. Perhaps I could tap into and refine her talents as one of the reincarnated. I had intended to keep it in my head, but before I knew it, my lips were moving.

“You like inventing things?” I asked her. “Plan on doing anything with it? Have any goals for the future?”

She looked at me and replied at once, “I do.”

We ignored Estia’s fervor.

“Mind telling me what?”

We chatted for some time after that. I wasn’t going to reveal myself as one of the reincarnated, but I *was* going to entice her over to my side.

Our last destination was Sagius’s restaurant in the slums. Despite its location, the building was large and clean. It stood out quite a bit compared to its surroundings.

When we entered, the staff froze and cried out at once, “The S-rank’s here!”

Well, that sure was a great way to make me want to leave. We sat down at an empty table and Sagius made his way over. He seemed to be the one in charge.

“Welcome, Mister Luciel and friends,” he greeted us.

“I hear good things about this place,” I said.

“And we owe that reputation to our meeting with you as well as the Valkyries for pleading our case for us.”

I noticed he didn’t mention Lumina in particular. “So what, you gather information from here or something?”

“Oh, no, sir. This is a simple restaurant.”

He didn’t even blink. He was totally gathering intel on the side. To be fair, it was probably for Lumina.

“I heard you have a past with Lumina,” I said. “Be there for her, all right? Don’t worry about me.”

“I’m afraid I have no idea what you’re referring to, but I will assist her however I may.”

“In that case, we’ll all have whatever the chef recommends.”

“We’ll have that right out for you. Order up!” he called to the kitchen.

“Chow down!” they called back.

What kind of call and response was that? My gripes aside, the food turned out to be pretty good. I offered them my congratulations on a successful opening, let them know I’d come back for a bulk order sometime, then set out for HQ with a firm pat on Sagius’s shoulder. I had entrusted Lumina to him, after all.

That night, Dhoran had something important to discuss with me, so I stopped by the inn they were lodging in. The three of them were packed like they were about to head out on a trip.

“Ah. Leaving the city?” I asked.

“That’s the plan,” Dhoran said. “All I wanted was to give Pola more of a taste o’ the world, y’know? It’s a big one.”

“Have she and Lycian finished doing that market research on your competitors and stuff?”

“Commedia Artifacts,” Pola affirmed. “Rina.”

“She still lacks experience, but she rivals even your flashes of brilliance,” Lycian added.

So Rina was their potential rival now.

“Then you’re going back to Rockford?” I asked. “You could stay as long as you like, you know.” I suddenly felt really bad about having left the three of them to their own devices since getting here. I’d put them off for too long.

“Heard from Lionel that you’re goin’ back to Merratoni to train,” Dhoran replied. “So makes sense we get back to *our* roots too, eh?”

“It’s been fun,” said Pola. “But we can’t let that girl beat us.”

“Over my dead body,” Lycian added. “Artificing simply needs a proper workshop.”

“All right,” I acquiesced. “Let me take you to the gate, at least. And here.”

I gave them the magic stones I’d gathered over the last couple of days.

“My boss is the best boss,” Pola praised me.

“He’s my boss too,” Lycian quickly said back.

“Contact me by arclink if anything happens,” I told Dhoran. “I’ll be there right away.”

“Appreciate it, lad.”

And with that, they were off. Back to Rockford.

“Wait, crap. I forgot to tell them I might be hiring Rina. Oh well.”

I watched their carriage disappear into the distance.

17 — Emotional Spring Cleaning

The day after Dhoran's departure, I paid Lumina a visit in her private quarters.

"What's this about?" she asked.

I sat across from her, cups of tea in front of each of us. I had to tell her my honest feelings.

"I'll get right to it," I said. "Your kiss made me happy. Really happy. I've never experienced anything like that before. Not since becoming a healer, anyway." She had hugged me before, but that had been more uncomfortable than anything.

Red colored her cheeks a little. "You certainly did get right to it."

Man, she was cute. I couldn't help thinking it. "I'm sorry. I just want to be completely upfront about this." I paused. "I greatly respect you, and I'd even say I enjoy your company."

"Then...you like me?" There was a hint of unease in her gaze along with something else that she didn't bother to hide.

"I do," I replied. "But...I don't know if it's love, or friendship, or trust, or what."

"Meaning?"

"Regardless of how you might feel about me, I want to prioritize how I feel right now. I want some time to seriously consider my relationship with you."

There. I was perfectly honest. Maybe I was overthinking things, but I figured Lumina was someone who valued sincerity. And I still had Nanaella and Monica to think about.

Lumina giggled. "Is that what you wanted to tell me? Goodness, I knew you were straighter than an arrow, but I certainly didn't expect a full report."

"I might not have needed to give one if I were staying, but I didn't want to leave any loose ends when I go. I'm heading back to Merratoni to train under my master again."

“Hm. Then go and do what you need to do. Learn well, and when you return, I’ll do something special for you if you can beat me. Anything you like.”

My imagination almost went wild, but defeating her was not a hurdle I could underestimate.

“I plan to be gone for about two months. I’ll come to see you when I get back.”

“I will be waiting.”

The coquettish smile on her face was almost enough to make me fall for her then and there. I burned it into my memory and then left for the pope’s chambers.

Her holiness summoned me inside, and everyone else exited the room.

“This is about the matter with Lumina, I take it?” she asked. “You have my blessing, of course, but I cannot speak for the spirits.”

My shoulders drooped. “Actually, Your Holiness, I just came to report to you that we’ll be leaving for Merratoni tomorrow.”

“Oh. Formalities. Boring.”

“Where did you even hear about that?”

“Places.”

“Confidential, huh? Well, as it turns out, I went shopping with Rosa the other day, and I just so happened to have found a present for you.”

“Oh, fine,” she sighed. “Rosa informed me when she returned from her trip with you.”

“I thought it might be something like that.”

I’d thought Catherine had surely been the source of the leak, but even if she wasn’t exactly a captain, Rosa had her own share of responsibilities as principal caretaker of the knights, which in itself gave her a decent amount of authority to speak with the pope. Who would’ve known she was so high up the ladder? I had learned from Ketty and Kefin that she reported to Her Holiness fairly often.

“I’m taking some time to think about things carefully,” I said. “Whether or not I think our relationship should take the next step, we both lead dangerous lives.”

And there were a few other people in my life who similarly needed some serious thought, but I didn’t say that out loud. I was going to have an honest talk with the two I had in mind once I got to Merratoni.

“Always so earnest. Perhaps you’re due a reward for your fidelity, and as it happens, I have begun proceedings for visiting Neldahl.”

“Really? That’s great to hear.”

The City in the Sky wasn’t so far off. I could feel my excitement building. Maybe I’d get to learn how to use offensive magic. Pola and Lycian could have created something to simulate spellwork, but learning to do it myself would be infinitely more useful. And, most importantly, it would make me that much harder to kill, which brought a nice, fuzzy feeling to my heart.

“Do not die on me, healer. I see greatness in your future, the likes of which we have not seen since my own father.” The pope’s smile made my heart flutter. Substance X was really starting to throw me off again.

“I’ll remember that. I’ll contact you when we arrive in Merratoni, and I plan to return in about two months. You’ll hear from me if there are any changes in our schedule.”

“Go with care.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.”

With that, I left her chamber.

Catherine was next on my list of stops to make. When I found her, she was black and blue.

“Lionel, would it kill you to hold back every once in a while?” I shot at him.

“That was Ketty,” he clarified. “Their skill levels are rather close. You’ll find our cat-woman in a similar state.”

I glanced around for her. “Fair enough. But where’s Kefin?”

“I believe he sprinted off, yelling something about finding a healer.”

Just how close were those two? I cast Extra Heal on both Ketty and Catherine.

“You’ve learned to control that spell at quite a distance,” Lionel commented. “The fruits of your labor.”

“It doesn’t really feel like it,” I confessed. “Everything I’ve done has been to survive. It doesn’t feel like I ever made a conscious decision to push myself for any reason that wasn’t related to life or death.”

Lionel smiled at me. “You have a talent for perseverance.”

But I knew that I had only made it this far thanks to my Assess Mastery skill.

“We’re leaving tomorrow after morning training,” I said. “As soon as we’ve had breakfast. Let the others know.”

“Yes, sir.”

I headed to the labyrinth next. The ghouls inside had devolved into zombies once again, as they should have. Their numbers had dwindled as well, and I hardly encountered any on the first floor.

“Looks like there shouldn’t be any trouble finding a new exorcist as long as they can use Purification,” I muttered.

I continued down to the tenth floor, finding only a few dozen monsters on the way, and only scattered individuals, at that. There were no large groups.

“The boss is a cinch with cleansing magic. But now I’m worried about someone trying to clear the place again.”

I didn’t know how many people knew that I had conquered the labyrinth at level one, but the knights at least knew the extent of my abilities. As long as I could use my magic, I could win a fair amount of matches against both templars and paladins. In a match of skill, however, it was much closer. And if someone like that could clear this labyrinth, all someone else would need was a way to deal with the wraiths and miasma and they were set to reach the final floor. And if *that* happened, someone *else* would have to come and fix it again. My head was starting to go in circles.

After confirming that nothing was out of the ordinary down to the thirtieth

floor, I turned around and climbed back up, collecting magic stones on the way. When I got back, someone was waiting for me at the shop.

It was Granhart, standing where Catherine used to. He gave me a tense look, as if surprised to see me here.

“Hello. What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Attending to my new duty,” he replied. “After your success in the labyrinth and subsequent appointment to the rank of S, the next exorcists were chosen with me as their superior. As you know, I do not meddle in the affairs of my subordinates so long as they obey our codes and rules, but this has evidently led to problems. Now, so as to avoid it happening again, I sought to make amends by placing the dungeon under my watchful eye.”

I knew Granhart was as stringent as they came but not to this degree, and towards himself, of all people. He and Catherine really needed to get it through their heads that beating themselves up was going to do more harm than good, although I did understand the urge to be alone for extended periods of time. Still, I figured I should ask Her Holiness to put a time limit on this sort of job.

“Well, I made it to the thirtieth floor and didn’t see anyone. Do you want to bind me to a contract to make sure I’m not lying?”

“No need. I’ve investigated you thoroughly and seen the myriad deeds and accomplishments that speak to your character as well as your qualifications for the rank you carry.”

Feeling a bit put off by his enthusiasm, I left it at that and returned to the magic elevator after a short goodbye.

“It’s a good thing Catherine was the one running the shop when I was an exorcist,” I murmured. “Granhart would’ve made me agree to be back by dinnertime every day with a contract, and I’d have never made any progress.”

Grateful for the mercy my past had shown me, I had dinner with the team, then got to bed early with my trusty angel’s pillow.

The next morning, we departed for Merratoni.

18 — More Than Bandits

The journey to Merratoni was uneventful. Until that evening.

Lionel and I rode at the front, with Kefin driving the carriage behind us in place of Dhoran. Ketty and Estia were talking inside. I looked back at them and grinned. Everything was peaceful.

But as the sky started to burn orange and I began to think about where we might spend the night, Estia flew out of the carriage. I turned to her, and Forêt galloped in her direction all on her own. Strange behavior for a horse, but it didn't bother me. She was my partner through and through. I trusted her judgment and urged her on.

"Estia!" I shouted. "What are you doing?!"

She suddenly faltered. "This is Estia's home. The topography. It's all the same."

Two voices. She had switched with the Spirit of Dusk.

"The sun hasn't even gone down yet. What are you doing out already?"

"Estia saw her surroundings and began to panic. The cat-woman tried to calm her, but she became incoherent and jumped out of the carriage."

Estia had been a slave in the past. This must have been where she had lived when she was free and still happy.

"She's your kin, isn't she? Can't you give me something more specific?" I asked.

"Our relationship does not allow me unchecked access to the lock and key of her memories. She needs time. May she have it?"

"Of course. We'll push on a little farther once you're ready. There's a village we can stay at just a short way from here."

"Thank you."

As our conversation came to an end, Ketty and Lionel arrived. I decided they should hear about Estia's past, except for the spirit.

“Estia was sold to the empire as a child,” I told them. “Apparently, this place is triggering memories of her past from before she was a slave, so she’s just going through a bit of shock right now.”

“Can’t blame her,” Ketty said. “Nothin’ harder to forget than childhood trauma.”

“Perhaps she was kidnapped from Merratoni or one of the surrounding villages?” Lionel suggested. “Or sold in one of them.”

“I don’t think it’s Merratoni. She worked at the Healer’s Guild there for a while.”

“Then let us hurry to the next village, where we can rest more easily.”

“Yeah. I’m not worried about any nocturnal monsters with you guys around, but some rest would do her good.”

We laid Estia down in the carriage while Ketty joined Kefin in the driver’s seat and continued on. But the trouble didn’t stop there.

Moments before the sun had set entirely, we came to a village. Except something wasn’t right.

“My name is Luciel,” I announced to the nervous men at the entrance. “S-rank healer of the Church of Saint Shurule. May I speak with your mayor?”

The men stirred, tension in the air, until the two collapsed on the spot. I whipped around to look at Ketty and Kefin in bemusement, but they were gone. The men had fallen to them. The pair had knocked them out for some reason.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

Why would they have attacked innocent villagers? They had been acting strange, yes, but not *that* strange.

Before anyone could answer me, Forêt reared up on her hind legs, throwing me helplessly to the ground.

“Ow! What was that for?!” I jumped to my feet and she brayed angrily in reply. “Uh, sorry?”

I felt her aggravation overshadow my own, and with renewed composure I

asked Lionel, "What's happening?"

"It seems Shurule has found itself infested with bandits," he answered. "An admittedly rare occurrence for the republic."

I understood now. The village had likely been overtaken by miscreants.

"Bandits? Are they domestic or did they come from another country?" I wondered aloud.

"Shurule enjoys a great degree of safety." He dismounted his steed. "The empire often has to dispatch entire platoons to deal with its outbreaks of brigands."

He held his hand out for a coil of rope. I handed him some, and he promptly tied up the men.

*

Ketty and Kefin, having discerned that something was wrong with the village, left Luciel in Lionel's care while they investigated the situation. But the mysteries only continued to pile up.

"Never mind bandits, it's not even sundown and I haven't seen a single villager," Ketty murmured. "Doesn't make sense."

"What if the bandits already set up camp?" Kefin wondered.

Ketty shot him an exasperated look. "Then they'd have caught us miles down the road, not let us waltz right in."

"Good point. I can sense them, but it's like they're not even here."

Ketty figured the villagers could have been enslaved or subjected to some kind of dark magic. If that was the case, then the best course of action would be to have Luciel heal them all.

"Any other job and this'd be the end of it, but we'd better fill Mister Luciel in," she said.

"Right."

They had started to return to the entrance when it happened. All of a sudden, the villagers flew out of their houses as dark magic fell upon them from above.

*

In spite of my concerns, the situation didn't seem to escalate. The villagers remained missing without a trace, and I didn't hear any sort of scuffle that might have indicated Ketty or Kefin had been attacked.

"Sir, wake Estia and secure the carriage in your magic bag," Lionel urged me. "It tells the enemy our location. You should shelter the horses in the hermit key as well."

"Good idea. Forêt, I'll see you again tomorrow. Promise." She shook her head at me. Something like determination gleamed in her eyes. "Okay, fine, but the carriage has to go. Can Estia rest on you?"

She drooped her head. We appeared to have reached a compromise.

"Sir!" Lionel hurried me along. "The enemy could be anywhere."

I peeked into the carriage. "Estia. There might be bandits around. I need you to come out and stay with Forêt."

The Spirit of Dusk would surely come to her aid if danger did arrive. I guided Lionel's horse as well as the ones pulling the carriage into the stable within the hermit key, then started to stow the carriage itself away when my eyes wandered to the enemies Lionel had bound.

"Hey, wouldn't it be better to have the carriage out so we can toss the bandits inside? The thing's light enough to drag."

"I suppose so," he replied, nodding and doing just that with the two unconscious men.

"We'll be taking Forêt with us. I'm confident she'll be able to sense any enemies, and she knows I'll toss her in the hermit key for our whole trip in Merratoni if she acts up."

"Hm. Very well."

Forêt gave me a blank look.

Night was just about upon us. From here on out we'd be getting a bit of extra help from the spirit.

“So, should we just wait? Or should we go find the mayor’s place?” I asked.

“You know where it is?”

“I’ve been here a few times.”

“Then let us go at once. We may find the chief of these criminals there.”

“Got it.”

“However,” he added, “should we take that course of action, I must insist that we put the carriage and horse away to conceal ourselves.”

I groaned. “But that’s a pain. Let’s just go. If they find us, we’ll beat them to a pulp. You know Ketty and Kefin will have our backs.”

“As you wish.”

I cast Area Barrier and off we went. The town was free of any traces of battle and yet there wasn’t a single sign of life around. It was well and truly night now, but not one house had any lights on.

“Maybe they’re all together somewhere?” I said.

“What concerns me is the lack of any evidence that a battle took place.”

We proceeded towards the mayor’s house, cautious, until we saw something illuminated in the distance.

“I’m worried that we haven’t seen Ketty or Kefin yet,” I commented.

“Those two would never be done in by a sorry band of brigands,” Lionel replied. “They couldn’t be. Not unless there was someone particularly exceptional in the group.”

The closer we got, the more distinctly we could make out what sounded like cheers. A bit farther down the road was the mayor’s residence, and there seemed to be some kind of party being held in front of it. But, as with everything in this place, something was wrong.

The villagers were gathered in a ring. Ketty and Kefin were in the middle of it. In the air was a strange, demon-like being, horns poking from its head, tail sprouting from its lower back, black wings stretching out from its shoulder blades. It was launching dark spells at the pair as the two dodged frantically.

I would have panicked if not for the surreal nature of the scene. There were cheers and applause in place of battle cries and shouts.

I told Lionel to get ready to move, and he did.

“Assuming that’s a demon, what are its weaknesses?” I asked. “The same as the undead?”

“Light and holy magic,” he replied. “If you can hit it with Sanctuary Circle, you might be able to weaken it. However, it won’t die so easily.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do. Be careful.”

“Understood. Advancing.”

“Do what it takes to protect them.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lionel let out a great war cry and charged towards the beast.

“Luciel. Sister.” I heard the spirit speak in Estia’s voice nearby. “If Sanctuary Circle isn’t enough to return the humans to normal, I will use my magic. Take care of Estia’s body when it is done.”

There was no time to answer. My sights were already set and the spell had been aimed. The light in the darkness expanded from the flying devil, engulfing the area with a great whirlpool of incandescence. I could hear it shrieking.

I pulled the carriage towards the cacophony and almost lost my lunch when I saw what looked like a pile of dead bodies. But it was just the villagers who had been under the demon’s control, having fainted.

“Sir,” Kefin panted, “you saved us. The bastard wouldn’t fight fair. Nearly had us.”

He and Ketty were bloodied with deep wounds, and Lionel’s shield had already been eliminated in the short time he had been in the fight.

“You interrupted the demon when you hurt it, and the villagers stopped trying to shield it,” Ketty said. “Gave us a solid opening to pounce on it and put it down.” Sweat poured from her face. This foe had clearly been a monstrous one. Yet, she and Kefin had fought to protect the innocents. I swelled with

pride.

“I don’t understand what such a powerful demon is doing so far from the empire,” Lionel said. “It is concerning.”

I agreed wholeheartedly. Shurule was supposed to be protected by a barrier that kept strong monsters out, but Ketty and Kefin were lucky to be alive. We hadn’t had a fight this close since the red dragon. And Lionel’s shield had been custom-made. Now, it was gone, and the wielder’s arm was bent in the wrong direction too. But he never once took his eyes off the beast that had inflicted the injury on him.

The fallen demon looked like a human in both size and features, but it had horns and a tail like a beastperson. A closer look revealed hard scales covering the ends of its appendages like a dragonewt.

“You guys really beat that thing,” I said in amazement. “It looks...human.”

Even in death, the thing was terrifying. I managed to bring myself close enough to put it into my magic bag, which I did with the utmost caution. Immense relief washed over me when it went in.

“We need to question the townspeople when they wake up,” I said. “But first, I’ll heal everyone.” Forêt whinnied, drawing my attention to Estia, who was passed out on my steed’s back. “Then the spirit used her power.”

Forêt, the only one to hear my muttering, nodded at me. I hadn’t seen any of the action go down, but it was an easy explanation for why all the villagers had collectively fainted.

I cast the highest degree of healing magic at my disposal on my team, including Purification and every ailment-curing spell I had. Then I proceeded to heal the townsfolk with Recover and Dispel.

19 — The Stray Devil

We turned over every stone where the demon and those under its control had been, but we found nothing hinting at the reason for its presence.

“My Sanctuary Circle didn’t destroy any traces of darkness or anything that could’ve helped us, did it?” I asked no one in particular. It was more stress-relieving griping than anything. The others only grinned at me.

Lionel shook his head. “It’s hard to say. That monster was enveloped in an exceptionally thick miasma, but after your attack, it vanished.” He held his hands up and shrugged exaggeratedly. “It’s not hard to believe that your holy magic may have utterly annihilated all traces of it.”

I regretted even bringing the topic up. I hadn’t actually seen the miasma myself.

“Whatever ritual it was trying to conduct, we knocked it out before it could finish, so we’re probably all right,” Ketty added casually. “Who knows if we’ll ever find out what really happened here, but that ain’t your fault.”

The fact that we might never know was *entirely* my fault.

“They’re right.” Kefin seemed to have read my mind. “We haven’t faced an enemy like that since the dragon. If you and Lionel hadn’t stepped in, we’d have been goners.”

Apparently, only one person here was on my side. The way he put it, though, sounded like the demon had been stronger than even Lionel.

“Kefin, you’re supposed to bully him, not make him feel better,” Ketty joked. She smirked, skillfully steering the discussion away from unsavory implications.

If the demon hadn’t been toying with them, they might very well have died. That fact resonated uncomfortably with me.

“Yeah, but maybe not in public. They’re awake,” he noted.

We looked at the villagers. Some of them were just starting to shake the grogginess from their heads.

“Sheathe your weapons,” I ordered. “We have no idea how they’re going to react.”

I cast Area Barrier once more, just in case anyone decided to try anything funny.

“How are you all feeling?” I asked them. I had to call out to them a few more times before they all came to. “My name is Luciel. I’m an S-rank healer. Can you understand me?”

A few more questions later and I eventually started to get through to them. Their minds gradually returned. The moment they processed who I was, they went horribly pale.

“Mister Luciel?!” one cried out. “When did you get here?”

“Hey, guys, Mister Luciel is here!”

“He’s with others!”

One shout roused another until they were all fully awake. And then for some reason, they were all prostrated before me. At least they remembered me.

“You can get off the ground,” I insisted. “I’ve barely been here an hour. We came running when we noticed something was off back at the gates, and we found you all being controlled by a demon. We defeated it and healed everyone, so you’re safe now. But I need to know what happened.”

One man stood up, came forward, and prostrated himself once more. I recognized him as the mayor.

“Our children are being held in my home,” he said. “A man calling himself a demon forced us to...”

“To do what?” I urged him.

“To perform a ritual...I think. Everything is...hazy after that.”

The mayor frowned and scrunched his face. It seemed genuine. Forêt could usually tell when someone was lying too.

“Does anyone know? Surely someone does.” No one spoke up. A demon strong enough to toy with my companions was probably entirely capable of

hypnotizing all these people into forgetting. “Okay. Ketty, Kefin, take the mayor to his house and see if you can find the kids. If they’ve been turned into monsters, put them out of their misery.”

I watched them leave, thinking of how I might figure out this collective lapse in memory. It was a stroke of good fortune that everyone was still alive to answer my questions, and that we had chosen today to make for Merratoni.

“I know you all must be exhausted, but who knows anything about what happened before you were put under the demon’s control? Tell me everything you remember leading up to your children being taken hostage.”

I couldn’t see any other reason for a *demon* to be here, so someone had to have brought it intentionally. Despite my suspicions, however, no one’s testimony supported them. In fact, they *contradicted* the mayor’s own. No one had any recollection of a demon threatening anyone.

“Why is this so familiar?” I muttered.

And then it hit me. It was just like what had happened at the Kingdom of Dwarves with the Spirit of Dusk’s powers. Except in that case, *everyone’s* memories had been altered by the dark magic. Except for mine. Because I was resistant to it.

“Lionel, get to the house. *Now.*” He dashed off while I stayed behind. “Everyone else, stay put.”

I funneled magic through my hands and into the Illusion Staff, then set off Sanctuary Circle. Something exploded, and an entity darted towards the village gates. The thing tried to take to the skies, but Lionel brandished his greatsword and let loose a raging torrent of fire unlike anything I’d seen him unleash before, engulfing it and sending it back to the earth.

“He’s really got that thing figured out,” I remarked. “I had no idea his sword could even do that. Color me surprised.” I turned to the villagers and cast Sanctuary Circle again, this time on them. “To think there were more...”

Whatever the thing was, it looked like one of the townspeople, but it had been hurt by my Sanctuary Circle, so it was dangerous. I imbued the Holy Dragon spear with magic and hurled it at the threat.

The enemy landed back on the ground, swathed in black miasma, and as the dark aura dissipated, it revealed a horned, winged monster. A demon from straight out of a storybook. No sooner did I see its full form than my spear reached its target, piercing its chest. The beast shrieked, then stopped moving.



Some of the villagers screamed. Panic spread. I transformed my staff into Illusion Sword mode and dismembered the demon leaping at me as it doffed its disguise as one of the townsfolk. The sheer gruesomeness of the act stopped the screaming.

I surprised myself. I had no idea I could move like this. It was like I'd awakened to a sixth sense and reacted to the danger automatically.

"Answer me, demon," I barked. "What are you doing trespassing in the Republic of Saint Shurule? And so close to her capital?"

The monster hacked blood as I cast Heal on his four limbs, regenerating them enough to keep him alive. Unlike the undead, it seemed that healing magic worked on these creatures.

"I may not be a paladin, but I won't hesitate to eliminate threats like you if I need to."

"Then do it. *Kill me*," the demon spat.

"No fear for your own life?"

He cackled. "As if I have one with wounds like these."

"Just so you know, I can rip that magic stone out of your chest long before you manage to overload and blow yourself up. So don't try it. And so you aren't operating under any false assumptions, I am fully capable of keeping you alive for as long as I need to."

I cast Heal on his limbs again, stopping his bleeding.

"I have no qualms with your kind," I said. "And I never intended to meddle in your affairs, even if our people will never be able to coexist. But there is no hero. You have no lord. There's no war, so what's the point of this meaningless conflict?"

"Says the man who slaughtered my kin."

"Tell me what you would do if I invaded your home and brainwashed your people." He said nothing. "Don't talk to me about slaughter. I fight to protect, to defend myself against the dangers life throws my way. But you. You're not a real demon, are you?" He was silent again. "Let me guess, you've come from

one of the labs in Illumasia.”

The blood drained from his face.

“I’ll treat you fairly if you’ll—crap! *Middle Heal! High Heal!*” I chanted frantically. But my spells were in vain. “Why did he die? Was his life bound to some contract? Unless it was a curse of some kind.”

But any curse would have been nullified by Dispel earlier. Maybe the Spirit of Dusk would have more knowledge about the demons.

Whispers had started to stir up a quiet clamor when Lionel returned with a charred black corpse, Ketty and Kefin following behind with new wounds.

“There were more?” Lionel asked.

“Yeah,” I replied. “I rooted him out with Sanctuary Circle and took him down with a surprise attack. Did you learn anything?”

I cast High Heal on them and cured their ailments as Lionel answered, “No, but the children were safe. It seemed like they were about to be transported somewhere.”

“Noted. We’ll figure it out later.”

“Yes, sir.”

I turned to the townspeople and looked out over each of their faces.

“The demons are gone. You can all return to your homes,” I told them. “I’ll be staying in the mayor’s residence today, so come to me if you need anything.”

There was no point in grilling them about things they couldn’t remember, and at worst it would make them distrust me. Setting up in the mayor’s house didn’t feel like a good thing to do either, but some of the villagers had been my past patients, so they would at least be willing to talk with me.

Before anything else, though, we made sure the children got back to their parents.

I turned on the lights in the mayor’s house, confirmed that there were no other children inside, then finally let the tension out of my shoulders.

“So what was that about?” I asked. There had been combat, sure, but they

had been in horrible shape.

“Guy got the drop on us while we were leading him here,” Ketty answered.

“And he got us good,” Kefin added. “If the light you shot off hadn’t hurt him, we would have been done for.”

“I found the disguised demon as he was attacking and countered from behind,” Lionel said.

“Which was a great help and all, but then the house exploded,” said Ketty.

“Playing firefighter was new. Particularly the part where the roof got blown off,” Kefin remarked.

“Oh, yeah!” I exclaimed. “I *thought* Lionel was putting out some crazy firepower.”

“One of the knights took an interest in my weapon and taught me some things,” Lionel clarified.

“I’m impressed you got them to like you that much.”

It was safe to assume that the “disguised demon” had been the mayor. He must have been shaking in his boots in Lionel’s presence that whole time.

“He showed me courtesy for being with you, sir. The man restoring the Church to its former glory. Or so he said. He seemed awfully happy about it.”

“Who, me? I’m just a coward with good luck. Correction: a hungry coward. Let’s have dinner.”

Before getting to that, I lay down Estia, who was still unconscious, in the mayor’s bedroom. Forêt Noire had finally gone back inside the hermit key. And lastly, I woke up the men we’d tied up, made them pledge to stay on their best behavior, and released them once I was sure they weren’t demons.

I cleaned the table with Purification, then laid out the food.

“When we’re done, we’ll clean up the place and do some investigating.”

Everyone agreed, and then we filled our bellies.

We got to work straight after dinner.

“Did either of you notice anything during your first fight?” I asked Ketty and Kefin.

“Well,” Ketty replied, “he had this fancy staff and an ominous urn.”

A staff and an urn. For the ritual? What kind of ritual had it been?

“I don’t remember seeing any of that.”

“They, along with the magic circle, disappeared when you cast your spell,” Lionel said.

“There was a magic circle?”

It must have disappeared in response to the holy magic. In which case, I had destroyed some important evidence. But I hadn’t had a choice. All I could do was let it go.

“We had no luck before, but shall we try again tomorrow morning?”

Lionel’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah. Anything else?”

“The mayor, or rather, the demon disguised as him, intrigues me,” he said. “No one suspected him for a second. I presume there may have been some advanced mimicry in play.”

“I agree. No one’s ever fooled Forêt before,” I said. “A simple disguise would never have gotten past her. Whatever he was doing, it must have affected the senses, like her smell, maybe.”

“Definitely,” Ketty agreed. “Kefin and I have sharp noses, but we didn’t catch a whiff.”

Forêt—who was very possibly a spirit—hadn’t noticed. Two beastpeople hadn’t noticed. What was going on here?

“Three demons,” Lionel mused. “It doesn’t make sense. That’s simply overkill if all they wanted was to overrun a single village.”

“I’d bet money the empire has something to do with it,” I said.

Lionel stared at me, surprised, with a muted hint of something else I couldn’t make out.

“Do you know something?” he asked.

“I remember how you and Ketty were investigating demons in Illumasia, and when I asked the demon if he’d come from their laboratories, he up and died. He was hexed for sure.” Hexed by something nasty that not even Dispel could remove.

“It can’t be,” Lionel growled. He frowned, frustration and disappointment mounting. In that moment, he wasn’t a warrior, simply a man disillusioned with his own country. “They wouldn’t resort to *creating demons*.”

It was in moments like these that it helped to give someone a bit of a light at the end of the tunnel. A little hope to cling to. Someone had taught me that once.

“Hard to say. But at this rate, we’ll really need to start considering protection a little more seriously,” I said.

“Do you mean to create your own private cohort?” Kefin asked excitedly. He had taken the bait.

“There’s the Order of Healing, but they technically belong to the Church,” I continued. “A unit I could operate more independently might be good. Especially considering we might have to go to the empire at some point.”

“You really plan to?” Lionel asked. Knowing me, he was genuinely and rightfully surprised. But if demons were wandering around outside Illumasia, then being *in* Illumasia wasn’t really much more dangerous than the alternative. And there was something I needed them to fix.

“Whatever’s keeping you and Ketty as my slaves is there, as are a mess of other complicated matters that’ll eventually need addressing, and I’d much rather have my friends and companions not be enslaved.”

“Fair enough, I suppose. But with our current schedule, considering our traveling between Merratoni, Rockford, and Neldahl, it may leave you with little time for romance.” Lionel gave me a teasing grin.

“I fail to see how that’s relevant!”

“He’s just worried about you,” Ketty said. “Y’know, polygamy’s legal in

Shurule. I sure ain't never heard of any guy getting cold feet around here, so you really should just pounce on Lumina while you can."

Yeah, pounce, sure. Very catlike. Hilarious.

"She's right," Kefin agreed. "You might not get another chance."

I didn't like how fervently or how close he was to my face when he said that, so I decided to end the conversation.

"I got it, guys. I'm thinking about it. Discussion over. Now, I want people on guard tonight, because we could be ambushed."

They saluted, and with that, we began our search of the house even though I was already more than a little worn out.

20 — The Darkness

We came up empty-handed. The mayor's house held nothing of interest. No documents, no anything.

"Guess this means we'll never know how the mayor ended up a demon, doesn't it?" I said.

"It's likely," Lionel replied. "I will say, I felt my blade go through him much easier than the first demon."

"Yeah, if they'd been at equal strength, we wouldn't be talking right now," Ketty said.

"Perhaps it has something to do with his mimicry."

"Maybe. Let's search the places where combat occurred and talk with the villagers again tomorrow," I said. "If we can't come up with anything by the afternoon, we'll keep heading to Merratoni."

"That seems wise."

"I'll keep watch," Ketty offered.

"You and Lionel rest, sir," Kefin said.

"We will. Wake me if anything happens," I told them.

I cast Area Barrier on everyone, then found an empty guest room to nap in.

"I should probably contact Her Holiness about all this first."

After doing so via arclink, I got in bed and closed my eyes, ready to get up at a moment's notice. Thoughts of humans turning into demons made it pretty easy to stay in a state of constant wakefulness.

I awoke some time later.

"Something's not right."

Upon exiting the room, I found Lionel fast asleep.

"There's no way he wouldn't notice me right now." I cast Recover on him. No

effect. “Was it the spirit? A demon? Either way, I swear to god, if something kills me...”

I walked to the living room, where I found a mysterious light emanating from Estia’s room. Awesome. Fantastic. What could go wrong?

I sucked it up and opened the door.

“She’s...absorbing the darkness?”

Estia, lying in bed, was sucking in a glowing black mist, but it wasn’t miasma.

“It’s like she’s breathing it.”

This wasn’t good. No one would be awake to react if we were ambushed, so I called Forêt out of the hermit key. I was taking a gamble, but if she really was the Spirit of Dusk’s sister, then maybe she could do something. Or at least I hoped so.

“Do what you can,” I told her.

She brayed. I cast Purification as well as Area High Heal, and continued to do so as a safety measure as I watched Estia. Forêt started to glow like back at HQ, and for some reason, this time the light made her look downright radiant. Like a pegasus. The light took the shape of wings, and what looked like golden rings seemed to appear on each of her legs. Then, the effulgence went into Estia.

The glowing stopped, and just like that, Forêt began to leave through the hermit key again.

“I have no clue what just happened, but thanks.”

I had no idea what the light had done, but I cast Extra Heal and Purification on Forêt anyway before she went inside. I turned back to Estia. The aura had vanished and she was awake, or rather, the spirit was.

“You did well, calling my sister,” she said. “Had things gone on, the dark aura may have damaged Estia’s mind.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re awake. Was that the backfire from using your power? It looked like she was absorbing it. Breathing it.”

If that had been the result of the spirit losing control, then I guess you could

call it divine retribution.

“It’s my fault. Her body has never experienced darkness of that degree before, and I pushed her. I overloaded us both.”

Her using her powers had certainly helped us out, but if Estia had gotten hurt because of it...well, she really had to reconsider her priorities.

“Okay, don’t do that again. Can I ask about the demons?”

“I’ll answer what I can.”

“Did you know there were two more of them in hiding?” I asked.

“What? There were more?”

I suppressed the urge to tell her that I had just said that and noted her reaction. Not even the Spirit of Dusk had noticed, unless Estia’s condition had dulled her senses.

“The mayor and a villager. They went right under even Forêt’s nose.”

“My sister failed to notice?” she said quietly. “If what you’re telling me is true, Luciel, then you need to rally the nations or else find a power to rival the demons, because the end is nigh. The empire has made the first move.”

“I think an explanation is nigh first.”

She clearly knew something I didn’t, and if she wanted me to go on a wild goose chase, then she needed to fill me in. And I needed to keep my cool—an impossible task in and of itself.

“Let me get this straight. You’re saying the empire is preparing for war?” I asked. “Or do you just mean their spies are on the move? And how do you know that this spells the end or whatever?”

“The empire...” The spirit gathered her thoughts. “The empire has been conducting research into harnessing the power of demons. But did you know that this only began as a product of their *original* research? At first, they were studying how to create heroes.”

“That’s news to me.”

Then this wasn’t just plain old human experimentation. They had been trying

to turn them into artificial heroes, and now demons.

“However, don’t be fooled by the class name. What they wanted were not literal heroes, but human weapons.”

What was wrong with those people? Why did we always have to resort to war to get over our differences? Power wasn’t exempt from the flow of time. Even the strongest would one day turn to dust. Their efforts would have been better spent researching ways to be prosperous, and if they really wanted to fight that badly, there were plenty of labyrinths with heaps of monsters to choose from.

“And did they succeed?”

“It has been decades since I last heard that their hero-creating experiments failed; however, as I said, that research was carried on as what we’ve seen in this very village. If word gets out... Wait, did you defeat *all* of the demons?”

“That’s right,” I said. “The Sanctuary Circle spell I used stopped the ritual but destroyed any evidence in the process.” Much to my chagrin.

“Then this experiment will be deemed a failure. You just might have delayed the development of even more powerful creations by another few years.” Her eyes pierced me. “Time you will gravely need to gather your strength.”

“Excuse me?”

“Luciel,” she said firmly, “if survival is your goal, then gather the blessings.”

“I assume you mean both the spirits’ *and* the dragons’.”

“You assume correctly. Find the Spirit of Inferno and the Spirit of Gales. Receive their blessings. Then return to Fluna.”

With those last words, the spirit seemed to reach the limit of her energy and collapsed back onto the bed like a limp doll.

“Great. Perfect timing,” I muttered. I looked at Estia’s body. “Why is it always me?”

I quietly left the room. When I opened the door, Lionel was waiting outside, looking a little sick.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. My head is a little cloudy but it will not interfere with my duty.”

“That doesn’t sound okay to me. I’m going to check on the two outside.”

“I will join you.”

He forced himself off the floor with purpose, and I found myself unable to tell him no. We quickly spotted the two outside the house, but they seemed unsteady and out of sorts.

“Just in case,” I said, casting Recover on them with a long-range magic circle. When the spell went off, they reached for their weapons and looked our way. Lionel stood in between us with his fiery greatsword.

“Oh,” said Ketty. “Just Chief and Sir Lionel.”

“Scared the hell out of us,” Kefin said.

They both knelt on the ground.

“What happened?” I asked.

“A wave of darkness hit us from the house all of a sudden, and then everything went hazy,” Ketty explained. “Could barely tell who you were.”

“You came at us with a spell, so we thought you were an enemy,” Kefin added. “Thankfully, the fog in our heads was starting to fade.”

I could only reach the conclusion that the spirit could have made the whole town go insane if it had totally lost control. But the others came first for now.

“The paladins will be here in the morning,” I said. “We’ll be investigating until then. For now, you all need some sleep.”

Ketty and Kefin saluted, then went inside.

Lionel gave me a questioning look. “What did you learn?”

“That the empire’s *definitely* involved in all this. And that if we hadn’t been here to stop it, they’d be invading Shurule a lot sooner.”

“Where did you...” Lionel stopped himself. “No. You’re almost certainly correct. I swear to you, I will protect you with my life, sir.”

He seemed different somehow. It rubbed me the wrong way a little.

“I have full faith in you. But we’re still severely shorthanded, so we need to up our numbers.”

“It’s going to get busy, isn’t it?”

“It’s looking that way. And I’ll need you in top form, so stay sharp.”

“Yes, sir.”

The emotions behind his calm, warm expression were a mystery to me.

At some point, the sun began to rise. It was light enough to be able to see around the village now. Lionel and I were watching the quiet town in silence when Estia and the other two emerged from the house just before daybreak.

“How are you feeling?” I asked Estia.

“Well. Thank you,” she replied. It was Estia herself this time, not the spirit. Would she be okay to get back on the road again?

“You two?”

“*Feline* fine!” Ketty quipped.

“No problems here,” Kefin said.

“Great. We’ll eat, search the house one more time, look for the missing items, and question the villagers.”

“Yes, sir,” they replied in unison.

After breakfast, we turned up empty at the house again, but there were several eyewitnesses who had seen the demon mayor and villager speaking with strangers often. The paladins arrived in the middle of our investigation, where we handed it off to them and resumed our trip to Merratoni.

“Too bad it wasn’t the Valkyries,” Ketty said, grinning.

“Bad luck, huh?” Kefin added.

Why must they hurt me?

Lionel shot them both a hard look. “When will you two just get married already?”

At the bomb Lionel blurted out, my jaw dropped. The pair stopped grinning

and went awkwardly stiff. And suddenly, their attention was on me.

“Why’s everyone looking at me? What, am I supposed to give you permission?” I asked.

“Won’t you allow them to be a family?” Lionel implored me.

“I mean, if that’s what they want, then of course.”

“With the emergence of the demons, I fear peaceful days will soon be in short supply for all of us.”

“I get that, but if you two are free and really do get married, I’ll still need you to stay with me.”

“Of course,” Ketty assured me.

“I still have a dream, and I need to be with you to achieve it,” Kefin insisted.

Lionel looked at them with a strange expression, then at me, and then he sighed.

“Likewise,” I said. “But my sigh’s of the relieved variety.”

It would be hard to replace them, and a few demons didn’t mean everything was going to go to the pits all at once. It would have been a real problem to have them leave when I needed them most, though.

“Thank you for your understanding,” Lionel said.

“Anyway, you just focus on your rematch with Brod. He’s gonna need your full attention, I bet.”

“I have taken your warning into consideration.”

It went without saying that the rest of the journey was exceedingly awkward. And it was all Lionel’s fault.

21 — “Luciell” the S-Rank Healer

Once Merratoni was visible in the distance, we could finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. Forêt Noire had been feeling unwell since that morning, and no amount of magic seemed to help, so I was riding in the carriage for a change. Lionel rode at the front, alert and on guard—mostly looking for opportunities to tease Ketty and Kefin, who sat in the driver seats. Estia was with me, but she had been looking down the entire trip and was a less than ideal conversation partner. So really, could anyone blame me for likening the journey to a dark cavern?

Lionel spoke to the guard for us when we reached the gate. I heard their voices start to rise.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“An imposter wearing your name seems to have passed through just recently,” he replied.

On break again today, Monsieur Luck? Fine, I get it.

I stepped out of the carriage and faced the guard. “Is there a problem?”

“Present identification,” the sentry said.

A new guy, maybe? I didn’t begrudge him for not knowing my face, of course. On the contrary, I respected him for doing his job.

“I’m here on business with the Healer’s and Adventurer’s Guilds. Here’s my identification.”

“Thank you, s—” His eyes went wide. “Is this real?”

I cracked a smile. “You can accompany me to the guild if you don’t believe me. I could go for a walk, actually.”

Estia still worried me slightly, but she had worked in this town before. I shot her a glance as she hopped out of the carriage, and it seemed like she was feeling better. Perhaps she had just been motion-sick.

Everyone else dismounted, and I stowed away the carriage and horses,

sparking a few surprised gasps from the guards. Then, I retrieved my S-rank card from the sentry and set out.

It wasn't long before old faces, including adventurers, started to call out to me.

"Mister Luciel, gimme a healing!"

"Teach these healers how it's done!"

"You shoulda told us you were comin'! I'd have bought ya some more clothes!"

"Can ya drink yet?"

"I opened up a new restaurant! Come stop by!"

The sentry looked more than uncomfortable with all the attention, but hey, I figured he wouldn't forget my face after this. The warm welcome was nice. It felt like coming home as a hero.

Kefin spoke to the guard for information about the imposter while I took in the familiar sights. Seeing all the architecture in a new light, recognizing the magic and dwarven construction, was a lot of fun, and I would have gotten carried away if I hadn't forced myself to stay on the road to the Healer's Guild. I really could've used a strong individual like Kururu to add some color to the day.

But first, I encountered the reason for the sentry's initial suspicion.

"That's him, sir," Kefin said. "The one using your name."

Before us was a carriage in the middle of the road. An exceptionally gaudy and decorated one.

"That's some taste," I said. "Well, maybe we just share a name. Let's head inside the guildhall."

I grinned at the others and they smirked back. Nice work, mister imposter. Thanks for helping to fix the awkward atmosphere. Maybe now I wouldn't sue him.

"How many, you think?" I asked.

“Three in the carriage,” Lionel said.

“What’s the plan?”

“If they really are stealing your identity, let’s watch and see how they react,” Kefin suggested.

“You and Sir Lionel stay out here,” Ketty instructed us.

With that, the two of them rushed up to the carriage.

“Hey, nice parking job, jerk!” Ketty shouted.

“You better be glad you didn’t hurt nobody!” Kefin jeered.

It took everything I had not to bust out laughing. This was the most surreal B-movie I had ever seen.

A woman emerged from the vehicle while a man stood up from the driver’s seat.

“Cut your barking, you animals! This is the great and illustrious carriage of the great and illustrious S-rank healer, Luciell! Do we need to put a couple of muzzles on you?” The man jumped down and drew his sword, but he looked about as intimidating as a smartass who’d had one too many drinks.

The woman sighed. “I try to tell him that these beasts can’t be reasoned with, but I’m certain Mister Luciell will be merciful. Have some shame and leave now, will you?”

Wow, screw those guys. Was this what human supremacists were like? If so, this was about as stereotypical as racists could get.

“Lionel, how common is crap like this?” I asked.

“It happens occasionally,” he answered. “I vaguely recall wiping blood off my blade that once belonged to one such jokester in the past.”

Even discounting the fact that they were my companions, seeing people looked down on like that was starting to make me see red. But I couldn’t interfere with Ketty and Kefin’s act.

“If they don’t come clean, we might have to make them,” I muttered angrily. “My first time coming home in years and this is what I get.”

“There are witnesses,” Lionel said calmly, restraining my frustration. “Let’s continue to observe.” Thank goodness one of us was level-headed.

“Making up for that bomb you dropped on them earlier?”

“I wasn’t myself at the time, sir.”

An effect of the overflowing dark aura? I had to ask the Spirit of Dusk next chance I got.

“Keep an eye out for anyone who might be inside the guildhall,” I told him.

“Understood.”

I continued to watch the scene unfold in front of us, and things were starting to heat up, but Ketty and Kefin looked thoroughly amused.

“They’re a good team.”

“Indeed.”

The sentry shook like a leaf as we spectated. Just then, the man struck Kefin with the hilt of his sword.

The woman turned her back on Ketty to boast at him, “I tried to warn you. You animals need to learn your place in the natural order.” Ketty said nothing. “Now, what’s the matter with you? Cat got your—” When the woman turned back, Ketty was already gone. “Hmph. Ran away. Smart.”

Suddenly, the man leaned onto the woman’s body. “Ugh, reel it in, pal,” she spat. She moved and the man fell right to the ground. “Uh, excuse me?”

Ketty suddenly reappeared behind her and knocked her out with a swift chop to the neck. “What’s wrong, cat got your tongue?”

“Pretty bad security for an S-rank,” Kefin noted.

“You’re not foolin’ anyone, pal,” Ketty shouted at the carriage. “Move your damn carriage.”

The man inside stepped out. He was tall and scrawny. “You’re both quite strong,” he said. “New adventurers, are you? Well, you’ll be glad to know that I am impressed, assuming your goal was to market your skills to me.”

“Wow, is that how I’d look if I didn’t train?” I remarked. “Where’s he getting

all that hot air from?”

“He has your hair and height, but you really look nothing alike,” Lionel stated. “Frankly, I’m amazed no one questioned him.”

That made two of us. Seriously, how had he gotten away with this? It was just plain stupid.

“The least he could do before committing identity fraud is a little research,” I grumbled. People were starting to gather around the scene, and my head was starting to hurt.

“Well?” Ketty urged. “Why’re you parked out here?”

“Because, you see, I am an S-rank healer,” the man scoffed. “Surely you have heard my name.”

“Nope,” Kefin said flatly.

“And this is why we don’t associate with animals. I am *Luciell*, you beast! Healer of the rank of S!”

Luciell... I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something about that name didn’t feel right.

“This is getting weird. How’s this guy passing as an S-rank?” I wondered aloud in bemusement.

“Shall we apprehend him?” Lionel suggested.

“No, I’ll make an entrance. You make sure no one leaves the guildhall.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Guard, come with me,” I told him.

“Y-Yes, sir!” he stammered.

He seemed convinced that I was the real one now, at least. As I approached, Ketty and Kefin were so into their roles that they took a knightly knee before me.

“Who is this? Are you the owner responsible for these two?” the man demanded. “Look at what they’ve done to my people! Do you know who I am? I am an S-rank! If I weren’t so merciful, I would have your head, but you’re lucky

this day. I'll consider this matter settled for a mere ten platinum pieces."

"You're too kind," I said. "Shall we make it a contract?"

"A what?"

"An oath before the gods."

"I knew that," he shot back. "I'm asking what it would entail."

"You prove that you're an S-rank healer, and I'll pay the ten platinum. If you're lying, you'll make amends for your crime for the rest of your life."

"I agree to the terms, of course, but have you even the coin to—"

Before this "Luciell" could even finish, I produced the money. "Yes. Do we have a deal?"

"Very well. May I be brought to justice should my words prove false!" he proclaimed.

"Great. He's all yours," I told the guard.

"I'm very sorry about this, sir," the guard said in turn.

"What is the meaning of this?!" the imposter shouted.

"Nice to meet you, Luciell. Allow me to introduce myself," I said. "My name is Luciel, S-rank healer of the Church of Saint Shurule. The *only* S-rank healer, I should add."

The crowd that had gathered suddenly broke into cheers and insults directed towards the fraud.

"Wait, you're—"

"Yep. Your friends are going in for questioning too, so I'd join them without a fuss."

The man slouched over, drooping his head as more guards came to apprehend him and his accomplices. They walked him back to the guardhouse.

"Wasn't expecting to meet another you, Chief," Ketty remarked.

"They say imitation is the best form of flattery," Kefin added.

“Pardon me for not being flattered in this instance,” I answered with a groan.

The awkwardness was gone, people were smiling again, and my doppelganger had been apprehended. The stage was nice and clean for Lionel and Brod’s rematch.

“You’re famous everywhere,” Estia finally chimed in quietly.

“You think so?” I said. “Well, I hope they at least like me here. This place is like a second home to me.”

She smiled but it was distant. “I’m jealous.”

I hoped she would find her own home one day.

When we entered the guildhall, we found a man tied up on the ground...with Kururu stepping on him. I froze for several seconds before I found my voice.

“Hey, Kururu,” I said awkwardly. “We can, uh, come back later if you’re busy.”

“Oh, hello, Luciell!” she replied. “He’s not a friend of yours, is he?”

“Not me. A guy named Luciell, who we just helped to arrest earlier.”

“Perfect. Gimme a moment to tidy up.”

The guildmaster hoisted the man up and carried him outside, laughing sadistically.

“Who is *she*?” Lionel asked.

“Well, I *thought* I knew the answer to that question,” I replied.

I couldn’t offer a straight answer. Instead, I made my way to the lounge room and contemplated life to kill some time.

22 — Home Away From Home

I hadn't come to the Healer's Guild first for any particular reason. It really was thanks to good old Monsieur Luck that it had led to bringing that scam artist to justice. His hiatus was finally over, it seemed.

Kururu returned some time later, excitement evident on her face.

"Anyway," she said, "welcome back, Luciel." It was nice to see her bright grin for the first time in so long.

"Thanks, but...is that the right greeting for a guild?" I wondered aloud.

"For you it is. Who are your friends?" Her eyes stopped for a moment on Estia and she smiled a little wider at her.

"Lionel, Ketty, Kefin, and Estia. They travel with me."

"You never stop being weird, do you?" Kururu said teasingly. "I'd be careful around this one, you guys. He has a habit of attracting trouble. That goes for you especially, Estia."

Estia looked taken aback. "You...remember me?"

She was supposed to have erased Kururu's memories, but maybe back then she hadn't had full control of her power like Lihzalea.

"How could I forget? I didn't expect to see you with Luciel, though, that's for sure. But on second thought, I probably should have. That boy has a habit of stealing stuff from me." She turned back to me. "Would it kill you to leave me a girl or two?"

I laughed. She was talking about how I'd indirectly caused Monica's defection to the Adventurer's Guild. And I was starting to realize just how true it was that trouble had a funny way of finding me, but still, I hoped that by denying it, I could yet be saved from this curse.

"Hey, you're not my mom. And stop giving them funny ideas. I don't attract anything, much less trouble."

Kururu's eyes sharpened with anger. "*Mom?* Listen, pal, I'm barely ten years

older than you, so you better make your peace with that before you wind up in my shoes. Otherwise, you're going to attract a whole lot *more* than trouble."

The funny thing was, she was absolutely right. I had absolutely no retort. Well played.

I shifted gears to the situation at hand. Fake Luciels aside, as long as the rest of the city was in relative peace, I wanted to spend the next two months quietly training.

"Anything new happen?" I asked. "It's been well over a year since I was last in the know."

"Oh, plenty," she replied. "You'll find out more when you get to the Adventurer's Guild, but there's been an influx of casualties lately."

An influx worthy of concern? Then something big must have happened. And it probably didn't help that Bottaculli, the city's top healer, was out of commission.

"There should be more healers in town, right?"

"Not enough. It's not uncommon to get a surge of poisonings, paralysis, petrifications... The monsters have been getting craftier."

"Sounds like we need people leveling up their Holy Magic skills ASAP so we have more access to the right spells."

There should have been a lot more healers around, but without the right teacher, that didn't mean they would be particularly *skilled* healers. And the best ones all went to the capital.

I remembered Bottaculli. Brod had once told me that he hadn't always been bad. That there had been a time when he'd healed for the sake of helping others. He may have strayed from the path, but his ability spoke for itself. He'd done the hard work, and that was the sort of attitude the Church needed going forward.

If so many adventurers were coming back hurt, it was possible that Brod himself was in the field with them. And there hadn't been any sightings of monsters capable of inflicting abnormal ailments since the time the Lineage of

the White Wolf had nearly died. I recalled that it had originated from the nearby mine.

“Are the monsters coming from the mine?” I asked.

“You already know?” Kururu said, then nodded. “I heard something about it being connected all the way to a labyrinth in Grandol.”

Wait, what was that last part? “So, correct me if I’m wrong, but is Merratoni kind of in a little bit of extreme danger?”

“Not with you here. You and the power you so righteously obtained for the good of others.”

“Can we dial it back a bit? I’m not the messiah over here. And what about the other healers? If it’s been that bad, shouldn’t their skills be leveling up?”

Kururu shook her head with a sad expression, then smiled at me. There was hope in her eyes. She was normally so strong-willed and steadfast, but now she was looking to me to make things right. I heaved a sigh.

“Recover is only practical for poison, paralysis, and sleep,” she said. “There’s no panacea for everything. You know that.”

I wasn’t sure about that; Substance X came pretty close.

“Uh, what? Why is their healing magic so wimpy?” The healers I had taken to Yenice had managed to cure status ailments just fine.

“If that’s how it looks to you, then it’s because they’ve had no proper teaching. As far as they’re concerned, you’re a madman.”

A madman? I was blessed by the Divine Healer, so yeah, I had a bit of extra help, but I wasn’t ready to be called a *madman*. Kururu stared at me with an amused smile on her face.

“I don’t get it.” I sighed. “All right, if that’s it, they probably need me at the Adventurer’s Guild. As an S-rank, I’m deeming Merratoni to be in a state of emergency and thus in need of my services.”

“The Merratoni branch recognizes your decision,” Kururu said. “Also, we’ve had a lot of people following your footsteps and registering with us here, but they’re trailing off.”

“Then I’ll show the healers we *do* have how it’s done while I get to work.”

“Will you? I knew you’d be my hero!”

Kururu leaned in to peck my cheek—but this time I dodged it. I did take note of how my heart did *not* flutter this time, and silently apologized to her.

“I see how it is,” she said. “You prefer Lumina, hm?”

“How did you—”

The timing was uncanny. It hadn’t even been ten days, and as far as I knew, the Valkyries hadn’t been deployed.

“Don’t underestimate us Healer’s Guild ladies.” She winked at me, a devastating blow to my psyche.

“Can I just get an inn sorted out?” I asked.

“There’s one near the Adventurer’s Guild that some templars stayed in. Will that work?”

“Perfect. I’ll head to the guild now.”

“Bring more fun gossip for me when you come back.”

“We’ll see.”

With a cold smile, I left the guildhall. Kururu would have made a great innkeeper.

The first person to speak up when we left was, surprisingly, Estia.

“Can I come to see her again later, sir?”

“Of course,” I said. “Oh, I forgot to give her the gift. Let me know before you leave.”

“Yes, sir.”

I thought I saw a twinge of red in her cheeks, but she turned away before I could get a good look. She had seemed a little antsy to chat back there.

“Anyway, Lionel, you’re really going to face Brod as a slave?” I asked him.

“Former general” sounded like a much better title to be facing an old rival

with, compared to “slave.”

“I am,” he replied. “I’ve informed him of the circumstances by letter, and he knows with which feelings I face him. I am more than content as the head of your fellowship.”

I couldn’t say anything back. It made me happy. “Okay, then. According to what we just heard, the adventurers are in dire straits. You might not get your match right away, but I’ll do everything I can to make it happen. I want to see it too, after all.”

“The Lion versus the Whirlwind. Wow,” Kefin marveled, smiling like an innocent child.

“I’ve never seen this rival of his in person, so I’m excited,” Ketty added. Her enthusiasm appeared to be much more professional than Kefin’s.

Meanwhile, Estia was whipping her head this way and that, enjoying the sights of the city for the first time in so long. I could relate. When we finally saw the Adventurer’s Guild, I couldn’t stop myself from smiling.

But nothing could have prepared me for what awaited us behind the door. The guildhall was absolutely overflowing with injured patients. Every open space was occupied by a wounded adventurer, and it looked more like a field hospital than a guild. Several weary people glanced my way, but no one recognized me.

On closer inspection, the adventurers were all young. I didn’t know any of them either. The mess hall was closed off.

“Let’s go,” I said, heading for the reception desk. I wasn’t sure I recognized the girl there. Maybe we’d met, maybe we hadn’t. “Hello, I’m Luciel. E-rank adventurer. Are Brod or Gulgar in? Maybe Nanaella or Monica?”

It didn’t matter who. One of them would be able to fill me in.

“My apologies, sir, but given the emergency, I’m under orders not to disturb any executives with guests.”

Given she had no idea who I was, the receptionist was doing her job wonderfully. And the fierce pressure of those behind me being stifled by

Lionel's own overbearing aura didn't escape my notice.

I didn't have time to waste, so I decided to pull out my trump card. "Can you pass along the message that Luciel, the S-rank healer, is here to meet his master?"

"A-At once, sir!"

The receptionist all but flew down the stairs. I felt everyone's gazes converge on me, sizing me up.

True to his nickname, Brod appeared as quick as the wind.

"There he is, the little bastard!" he shouted. "Your timing couldn'ta been better. Let's go. Downstairs. Some poor fellas need your help bad."

He grabbed me and pulled me along, sweat visible on his skin, but Lionel stopped him before we could go too far.



“A moment, Whirlwind,” he said.

“So the Lion *is* hangin’ around Luciel now,” Brod noted. “Our date’s later. C’mon, downstairs.”

His voice was steady but colored with a distinct impatience that said he would not let someone die by standing around. I gave the others a nod and followed him.

At the bottom of the stairs was a situation far worse than what I’d seen above.

“This is just like Yenice,” I muttered. “No, worse. Petrification, paralysis, enfeeblement, curses...” I saw some healers tending to the various afflictions, but they weren’t making much progress. “Master, can you separate them into physical wounds and status ailments?”

“On it, but I need you to get Gulgar back on his feet.”

“What?”

Gulgar was incapacitated? How? I couldn’t even wrap my mind around it. It was *Gulgar*. The man was built like a brick wall.

Brod took me to him, and immediately I was at a loss for words. What he showed me wasn’t Gulgar. It was a statue. I had no idea if he was still alive. Unsure whether even High Heal would be enough on its own, I chanted the spell under my breath while secretly free casting Extra Heal as well, along with Dispel and Recover. A surge of light blanketed him, restoring his carbonized arm and closing up the gashes all over his body like they had never been there in the first place.

Once I was sure he was in the clear, I cast Purification to clean up the congealed blood. A roar of cheers broke out across the training ground. I jumped at the sudden noise.

“Yeesh. He’s got a lot of fans. Well, not like I’m one to talk. Anyway, separate everyone like I asked, Master. Gather the healers too. Also—”

I cast the same four spells on him that I had used on Gulgar. I’d noticed when he’d tried to pull me down here that his strength had felt considerably

lessened. Who knew how hard he'd been pushing himself.

"Thanks, Luciel," he said softly. Then he addressed the other able-bodied people. "If you want your asses saved, get in line! Physical wounds and status ailments, split up! Worst injuries first. Healers, listen to the S-rank and watch how it's done!"

Everyone jumped into action. Guild staff directed the chaos per Brod's instructions, and somewhere in the madness, I met eyes with Nanaella and Monica. We smiled at each other.

"He actually commands their respect," Lionel muttered in admiration. "Hard to believe this is the same man who turned down a well-paid leadership position on the self-proclaimed grounds that he was underqualified."

I proceeded to treat each patient at death's door individually, lecturing the healers on visualization. Next I moved to less critical patients and provided less chatter and more demonstrations with Area High Heal. With my fifth cast, all those with severe external injuries were healed, and I moved on to those afflicted with more complicated ailments. I left the less serious cases for the healers to practice what I'd taught them.

"I heard you have trouble curing ailments for some reason," I told them. "So, let me tell you what I visualize when I work. Bear what I teach you in mind, stay strong, practice, and you'll be great healers in no time."

The young healers replied enthusiastically. They weren't lacking passion, but their skill levels were amateur.

It had been a long time since I had last got into teaching, and it wasn't so bad. By the time we were finished, my magic was almost tapped dry, but I managed to hang in there.

"Nice work out there, Luciel. Ya saved our asses." The bear-like wolf-man had come to. Gulgar seemed full of energy again.

"You'd have been there for me," I answered. "You okay to be on your feet?"

"Hey, I'm a sturdy guy."

Extra Heal could only heal the outside, but based on how normal he was

acting after all that trauma, it wasn't just his body that was rock-solid.

"You were pretty bad, though. What kind of monster did that to you?"

"Let's save that story for later. We got a reunion to celebrate, which means I've got cookin' to do."

That was one way to avoid a question. Whatever the answer was, it wasn't something that could be said in public or in the span of a short break.

"I'll definitely look forward to that," I told him. I turned to Brod. "Master, I've heard that this is the norm nowadays."

It was unthinkable, really. Wounds like that on people like those two? *Normal*? Only the demons came to mind, but Kururu had said a labyrinth was involved.

"Yeah, about that," Brod said. "A labyrinth in Grandol's gone haywire and the monsters're flooding into Shurule. The top adventurers over there got their side covered, but that just means we're getting the worst of it now."

"But that's not all, is it?"

"Damn right it's not. I don't know how the hell it happened, but the mine's been connected right to Grandol, so the monsters have a highway to our damn doorstep."

And the more wounded they accumulated, the fewer people they had to address the issue, which meant ever more adventurers out of commission as the cycle continued. I wished they would understand that a day's worth of pay wasn't worth their lives.

It almost sounded like a direct attack by Grandol. A situation like this called for the Knights of Shurule, but the capital couldn't be left empty with everything that was going on, and one wrong political step could mean war with Grandol rather than Illumasia. If that happened, there would be no better chance or excuse for other countries to team up to beat Grandol down.

"All I wanted to do was see you and Lionel fight, but now it seems like the world's going to end if I don't somehow involve myself in this nonsense," I griped.

“You in?”

The main thing holding them back was the lack of qualified healers. There was the Doctor’s Guild, but it wasn’t that prominent, what with the Healer’s Guild throwing its weight around Shurule. As long as I was around, though, there was nothing my master or his adventurers couldn’t face. And if I were, for some ungodly reason, out there on the battlefield, the presence of both Brod *and* Lionel meant the risk to me was minimal.

“What kind of apprentice would I be to turn down my own master?” I said. “Plus, Merratoni’s special to me. But I need you two to make sure I’m protected or you can find some other healer to clean up your sparring injuries.”

“Sounds like it’s time for a celebration.”

“Not quite. I have people to talk to and preparations to make.”

“Who are you, Galba?” Brod scoffed. “You know damn well we’re up shit’s creek because you had him run all the way down to Yenice.”

“You practically *live* up in that creek in this industry.”

I noticed attention had gathered on us as we talked. My master was probably trying to distract the questioning looks regarding me joining the fight by changing the subject. So no strategies or logistics were discussed that day. Instead, we gorged ourselves on Gulgar’s cooking, and near the end of the party, Brod and Lionel absconded to the bar together. And boy were they a pair.

I placed myself somewhere I could get a good view of the two while I caught up with Nanaella and Monica, and presented them with their gifts. The three of us chatted the night away, sharing stories about everything that had happened since my departure for Yenice.

23 — Otherworldly Power

The day after the big party, I was minding my own business, about to have some Substance X, when Brod and Gulgar stopped me.

“Luciel, listen, I’d expect to jump up a few levels pretty soon,” my master said. “The monsters have gotten that strong.”

“I know you’re all about the health benefits ’n all, but you’ve gotta be runnin’ out of those after how long you’ve been drinkin’ that stuff,” Gulgar added.

“True, but I almost passed out when I had some for the first time in a while a few days ago,” I said, “so I figure I might as well keep my taste buds primed.”

“Stop, for the love of god,” they both pleaded at once.

If it was bad enough to warrant those two harmonizing so beautifully, it must have been pretty rough. Then again, this was a good chance to address my concerns about how I’d been having trouble leveling up. Veterans like them had surely hit their own share of plateaus.

“But I’ve been having a lot of trouble leveling up lately,” I said.

“It’ll go up,” Brod assured me. “Give it time. And we’ll make it easy for you, ’cause we’ll need you healing our asses nonstop.”

It wasn’t much of an explanation, but somehow I had a feeling he was right. I also got the hidden meaning behind his words.

“So you’re saying I’m going to need as much mana as I can hold.”

“Pretty much.” Brod’s eyes were firm.

“Noted. All you need to do is keep the monsters off me.”

“I can do that.”

“We will protect you, sir,” Lionel interjected. “*You* need only show me what you’re capable of.”

Brod huffed. “You think you can handle what I’m capable of?”

They looked kind of cool, talking and drinking at the bar, but in reality I knew

this was them at their most relaxed. Now if only they'd stop bickering like kids.



A short time later, we piled into a wagon with some other adventurers and set out for the mine.

“Kefin, you’ll take point with Brod,” I instructed. “Lionel, you’ll be in the middle. The third row will be me, Ketty, and Estia. Gulgar will take the rear.”

“Not including the other adventurers?” Brod asked.

“For now. If the monsters were stampeding, we’d have an all-out war on our hands, but based on what you’ve told me, a small, elite squad would be best.”

“Huh.”

“Let me explain,” I began. “You can outpace even the fastest monsters, and Kefin can detect and disarm traps. Lionel excels at mid-range combat and will act as a wall between me and the fighting. Ketty’s fast on her feet and Estia is skilled at detecting enemies, so both of them will stand at my flanks to protect against ambushes.”

I simply didn’t trust enough of the adventurers to let them have my back. Of course, if the Lineage of the White Wolf had been here, it would’ve been a totally different story.

“And with Gulgar at the back,” I continued, “he can buy us time in case of surprise attacks from behind. I like to think I’m experienced enough to get a feel for everyone’s abilities, and this is the safest formation for me.”

“And here I thought you were talkin’ actual strategy.” I thought I could see the edge of Brod’s cheek twitch. “Your rank might’ve changed, but *you* sure didn’t.”

No objections were raised by anyone else. I took that to mean that either they had given up or my formation was objectively the best course of action. I chose to believe the latter.

“It shouldn’t be surprising that I still don’t want to die. Rest assured this lineup is meant to keep everyone else alive too. Not just me.”

Brod cackled and gave my shoulder a firm pat. “You don’t got the face of a kid no more.”

“Because I trained him in your absence,” Lionel said smugly. A clear taunt.

“You trained a gem / polished, Lion. Thought we went over this shit already.”

They had been bickering over whose apprentice I was since yesterday. Their friendship sure was beautiful to see.

The argument would go on for hours if I let it, so I interrupted them with a question. “We didn’t talk about the monsters too much yesterday, so just to make sure, they turn into magic stones when they’re defeated, right?”

“Nope. They have gems in their corpses, but they do leave bodies behind,” Brod replied. “Treat ’em as regular monsters.”

How did monsters spawn in a labyrinth? Was it a process? Or were they just illusions, the memories of Galdardia itself? If they had been transported, then that implied the existence of a being with power over reality.

And that was as far as I was willing to take that train of thought. I wasn’t about to risk jinxing myself.

“Won’t slaughtering them outside attract others to the smell of their blood?” I asked.

“We have to contain it,” Brod replied. “However we can. Mostly with fragrant herbs from the Doctor’s Guild.”

So this was a point of concern. I was surprised the Mage’s Guild hadn’t come up with a magical solution to the problem.

“When we get there, I’ll purify the area. Then we’ll focus on healing and eliminating the enemy. Assuming they’re patient today.”

The wagon jostled. I prayed that healing would be the only thing that today called for, and not burials. But until we got there, that was all I could do. Pray as the wagon rolled endlessly.

“How far is it?” I asked.

“Should be there in about half a day.”

I really should have asked that sooner. I looked at the lazily trotting horses with regret.

“I’m glad I found that out now. We’re switching rides. We’ll make better time

this way.”

“Don’t think there’s gonna be much of a difference,” Brod said.

“You’ll see. I’m not anxious to throw myself into danger or anything, but the faster we go, the more lives we can save.”

Brod and Gulgar gave me strange looks, but when we finally set out in the carriage my team and I usually used, they understood. We left the other adventurers in the dust. Unfortunately, this was a matter of life or death for some people. The rest of the group would have to catch up with us at the mine.

“This musta cost a fortune.”

Brod was right. Had Dhoran taken this as a normal commission, it certainly would have cost an arm and a leg. Gulgar and my master were amazed.

“This was developed by the Research and Development department of Luciel and Co. All it took was some magic stones and treant wood, though mostly the former.”

“You’re a healer, former-Yenitian council member, and now a business owner?” Brod widened his eyes. “Since when?”

“It just sort of happened. I got lucky and invested in some talented people.” I didn’t really know how else to put it.

Our pace improved dramatically—like moving from a local train to a one-way express. We made the half-day journey in just three hours.

“You’ve gotta make me one of these.”

“Sure thing. But we go by foot from here.”

I could see something flying in the distance. We stepped out of the carriage, and I put it in my magic bag, then placed the horse in the hermit key.

“Is that what I think it is?!” Gulgar exclaimed.

“You’re one lucky sucker. We only found one of those things in our whole careers.”

Oh, I was lucky all right. *Monstrously* lucky.

“Guess I am,” I said.

“In that case, here.” Brod handed me a worn key.

“What is it?”

“A key like yours. It opens the hermit coffin.”

The hermit *what*?

“Did you just curse me?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Sounds like it, doesn’t it? You can put unconscious people in there.”

Fitting for a coffin, I figured.

“Unconscious? So you can only go in when you’re asleep or something?”

“Nah, you can go in when you’re awake. Just won’t close. But once whoever’s inside wakes up it’ll open back up and spit ’em right out.”

So it would work with paralysis or someone in a comatose state? And it could shoot them right out in the middle of a boss fight? But if I put it in my magic bag, wouldn’t that cause time to freeze for whoever was inside? No, that couldn’t be right. The hermit key went into my bag just fine. This required investigating.

“Have you ever used it?” I asked.

“Only once,” my master replied. “Hell if I know what to do with it, though. So it’s yours. If anyone can figure out a way to put it to use, it’s you.” He didn’t seem to want to look at the key directly for some reason.

“If you say so. I’ll definitely try.”

“Good. Now let’s knock that thing outta the sky.”

“Agreed.”

The monster in the air appeared before us—a flying lion. I cast Area Barrier, and everyone leaped into action.

“Sir, a spear to throw,” Lionel requested.

I tossed him a holy silver javelin, and he caught it confidently before swiftly sending it flying at the beast a second later. It soared with incredible speed, but

the distance was great enough to allow the lion to dodge—only for it to plummet to the ground as its wings were severed. I could have sworn I'd seen my master for a split second.

Without missing a beat, Lionel swung his greatsword, swallowing the lion in an explosive plume of fire. When the smoke cleared, the monster had been decapitated.

"Simple enough," Brod said. "Still haven't lost your touch, eh, Lion?"

"Same to you, Whirlwind," Lionel replied. "Your accuracy with a blade doesn't suffer from your speed."

The two had demonstrated incredible strength that, frankly, I didn't think belonged on this plane of existence. It confused me.

"Lionel, were you holding back against the red dragon and the demon?" I asked him.

"I faced the dragon only days after my recovery," he said. "And my equipment was in a poor state. As for the battle yesterday, I feared I would destroy the entire village at full strength. We're currently in the wilderness."

"So you're telling me you still haven't even gotten close to showing me your best?"

"I will say that I have gotten *far*," he replied glibly, flashing a dauntless grin.

The limiters in his brain probably wouldn't let him go completely all out either. But it seemed those concerns went right out the window when showing off to Brod. Lionel's competitive spirit had been awakened.

"What, nothin' for me?" asked Brod.

"I already know you don't count as human," I said. "What I'm more curious about is what monster could have managed to hurt you as bad as you were yesterday."

"Somethin' a whole lot nastier than that manticore," Gulgar answered for him. "Three of 'em to be exact, and one was a variant. *And* he was protectin' other adventurers at the same time."

"Yeah, well you nearly got yourself killed takin' all the hits for them," Brod

shot back. I assumed he didn't like having the curtain drawn back on him. He could be so childish sometimes.

What I could glean from all this was that it wasn't necessarily the monsters' strength that had been the problem, but rather the presence of other adventurers holding them back. Were they not forcing Substance X on the newbies? If not, they really should have been.

"You and Gulgar used Substance X in the past, right? How were you affected that badly by those ailments?" I asked them.

The air seemed to freeze over. The two exchanged glances and the mood turned awkward. I could take a hint, so I rephrased the question.

"I would've thought you two could handle things with a group of high-rankers at your back. Was it that bad?"

"These chimera types are crafty. They hunt the weakest first," Brod replied. "And they're not all that's out there. We weren't ready for the swarms of ailment-inducing monsters. Keepin' those at bay ain't a simple matter of one little group of high-rankers."

In that case, if things were that dangerous, what were we doing hanging around here? My master and his freshly riled-up rival could take on anything.

"Sounds like we need to move, then."

"Hey, get back here! You want us to protect you or not?"

Impatient, I hurried over to stash the dead manticore in my magic bag. Soon, though, the others overtook me and assumed the formation I had laid out earlier. Satisfied, I increased our pace.

We arrived at the mine's entrance ten minutes later. Or rather, what *should have been* the mine's entrance. It seemed to have completely collapsed in on itself, and when I approached to investigate, I found out why.

It hadn't been caused by any monster. No. It was a gateway. That same door that led to one of the imprisoned Eternal Dragons.

24 — A Wish

Near the Eternal Dragon's doorway, a fierce battle was going on. I recognized one of the combatants.

"What's Galba doing here?!" I shouted.

Yenice needed a leader now more than ever. I wanted to be frustrated, but I swallowed my words. Galba never did things without a good reason. I looked at Gulgar, who was watching his brother with great excitement.

"That's my brother right there!" he cheered. "Walabis ain't doin' so bad either."

I squinted and indeed saw, to my surprise, the tanukin fighting alongside many other adventurers. With my master at the head, we charged into the mob of monsters attacking them, piling up corpses as quickly as we carved through them. Not a single foe so much as touched me. The adventurers followed in a frantic attempt to remove the dead bodies.

A horrible stench covered the battlefield, and as wonderful as a shower of rain would have been to get rid of it, the sky remained contemptuously clear. I attempted to purify the air myself, trying not to think about the macabre job of deodorizing a growing mountain of corpses. Killing my nostrils with a mug of Substance X would have been so much easier.

"Gulgar! You're alive!"

Suddenly, Galba appeared before us and threw his arms around his brother.



I didn't have a clue when he had gotten back from Yenice, but I also didn't doubt that it was entirely within his capabilities to fly here within a day if he needed to. Doubtless many monsters had met with a cruel death after he had learned of the wounds his brother had sustained. This might've been the first time I actually felt bad for them.

Walabis looked like death at a glance. Galba had surely placed him with Gulgar just to be certain he would know if anything happened to his brother. That relentlessly methodical side of him had probably only been made that much sharper during his time leading a country.

"Luciel helped a bit with that," Gulgar admitted.

Galba looked my way and smiled gratefully. He'd probably been too worried about his brother to notice me earlier.

"Thank you," he said.

"He'd have done the same for me," I replied. "How's Yenice?" I knew he wouldn't have left them on their own.

"Things were fine before I left about three days ago. Your little company's been a big help."

Three days? If a round trip from here to Merratoni took a full day, then Galba really had flown all the way here in just a little more than one. A bunch of freaks of nature, these guys.

"Everyone was sad they didn't get to give you a proper goodbye," he continued. "Impressive that you managed to win over so many beastfolk."

I laughed awkwardly. "Well, I had help from you guys."

I didn't feel like lingering on the subject, and thankfully Galba's piercing glare did the job of changing it better than I ever could.

"Brod, I'm very proud of you for killing the chimera, but we're going to have a problem if you keep breaking formation," he snapped at my master.

"Lay off," Brod said. "What's the situation?"

He and Gulgar were clearly more than a little angry at the sight of all the

wounded, but as leaders, they needed to keep calm. Like Galba. It was obvious that he wasn't upset in the slightest, because we'd have all been cowering if he were. Brod knew that too.

From what I could tell, the fighting had ended. The adventurers seemed to be removing and skinning the monsters.

"They're gathering, but we're managing thanks to the fact that they get weaker once they're on Shurulian soil," Galba explained. "Nothing we can't handle, and the worst we've had from the mine were some nasty, ailment-causing monsters."

Everything appeared calm. I wondered if there was any point to us being here but kept quiet and waited for Brod's instructions.

"The tanukin been any help?" Gulgar asked.

"Kind of?" his brother replied, uncertain.

Walabis could shapeshift, but how that translated to battle effectiveness was beyond me. Frankly, the fact that he had survived at all was worthy of praise.

"Ii've been using loots of smelling herrrbs, thank yooouuu very muuuch," the tanukin droned. Evidently, he hadn't changed much.

"How's slave life treating you?" I asked him.

"The hell did you just..." He stopped when he noticed who I was and shuddered. "S-Siirrr Saaaiint! Whaaat a coincideence!"

Was the trembling really necessary?

"Not a saint. I finished my term in Yenice so I'm visiting Merratoni."

"This is a nightmaaare," he moaned quietly. "Firrrst Galba runs me ragged for his brotherrr, whooose injuries I had nooothering to do with! And nooow there's *this* ivory deeemon."

From saint to demon in the blink of an eye. Impressive. And I wasn't the only person who'd overheard him. Ketty and Kefin shot Walabis pointed looks, making his face turn its own shade of ivory. I no longer had the time nor the patience to continue entertaining him, though.

I glanced at the sealed doorway, still distinctly discernible from afar. What was it doing outside? And in the middle of the wilderness? This was starting to make my head hurt.

“So, when do we consider our job done?” I asked.

Brod and Galba exchanged looks, then Brod replied, “Good question. We’ve still got some monsters creepin’ in from the border, which’d mean we just have to wait on Grandol’s adventurers to take care o’ the labyrinth. But we’ve dealt with the worst of the bastards crawlin’ outta the mine, seems like, so we can probably handle it.”

I knew why he was telling me that. The only reason I’d normally ask the question in the first place was because I wanted to leave. But this time there was something else deserving of my attention. And my hands were tied.

“So you won’t need a healer?”

“We shouldn’t. Things aren’t as bad as I thought. Now what the hell’s that look on your face?”

“So, uh, can anyone see that door over there?” I pointed towards it. No reaction.

Kefin understood first. “Sir, you don’t mean...”

The rest of my team looked my way in shock. Little did they know that the victor in terms of sheer disbelief was not them but me.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s that door. And we’re not even in a labyrinth.”

“Luciel, start talking some sense,” Brod said. “A door? Labyrinth? The hell’s going on?”

I thought that, as the guildmaster of an Adventurer’s Guild, he might have known something, but it seemed I was mistaken. Before I started to explain, though, I looked around at Walabis and the adventurers and stopped myself.

“I can’t say. Not around people I don’t trust.”

“Sounds important,” said Galba. “I can take care of Walabis.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“I got the adventurers,” Gulgar offered.

“Thanks,” I said.

Galba grabbed Walabis by the collar and dragged him away, Gulgar following with the others. Once they were gone, I organized my thoughts and decided where to begin. But first, I had to take precautions.

“I’ll need to bind you by contract,” I told Brod. “All of you, actually. The price will be your memory of the next few minutes. If you try to tell anyone what I’m about to reveal to you, it will be paid and you’ll forget everything.”

“Whatever I gotta do,” he said. “I’m a guildmaster. It’s my job to know.”

The contracts were made, and I took a breath.

“So,” I began, “the doorways. Behind them are imprisoned beings called Eternal Dragons, and they’re meant to bestow their blessings upon the hero. When their seal is broken, a large magic gem may appear, and I need you to promise that you’ll let no one touch it. Ever. Anyone who does and everyone around them will die.”

“Huh. So it’s cursed? What is it, some important relic?” Brod asked.

I couldn’t really blame him for his curiosity. One’s first instinct upon seeing a magic stone was to pick it up. But I’d seen the damage it could cause.

“No. It’s just a trap meant to entice greedy souls into the Wicked One’s clutches. It calls him, and anyone who happens to be there is corrupted and turned undead. That’s pretty much it.”

Stunned silence fell. Even my team, who more or less knew the situation, couldn’t keep the astonishment from their faces.

“Then why not keep the dragons where they are?” Brod argued. “No stone shows up, no one dies.”

“Because then the world will be consumed by demons and monsters before the hero has a chance to save it. I know, I thought the same thing.”

The empire was already experimenting with creating its own demons. It was only a matter of time before it managed to fabricate its own demon *lord*. Not even Lionel knew about this hypothesis of mine.

My master was a good man, and that nature of his was why I had to involve him. I needed him to give me the strength to walk through that door.

I gave a weak smile, and reverent silence fell again. Whatever I was doing to inspire confidence, it wasn't on purpose.

"Why's it gotta be you doing all this dangerous stuff?" Brod asked.

"Luck, I guess. I was the one to free the first dragon, so..." I pounded my chest and smiled. "Here I am."

"Hell, when'd you go and make yourself a proper adventurer?"

"If this is what being an adventurer is about, I'd like to return my guild card." I laughed dryly.

Brod looked distant for a moment, then smiled. "You do what you gotta do. I'll be here."

"Thanks. Everyone else, deal with anyone who gives you trouble. Just don't kill them. I'll heal whoever I need to when I get back and we can all move on with our lives." They saluted in response. "All right, I've got a dragon to free."

I paced over to where the door stood solemnly, as if it had been waiting patiently for me. No monsters in sight.

"Here goes nothing, I guess," I muttered. "Hope this dragon's less eccentric than the others."

I put my hand to the door and at once felt the magic drain from my fingertips. A yellow light snaked into the shape of an ornate insignia. The question now was did yellow mean light or thunder?

The door swung open. After one last look back, I raised my hand at everyone and stepped inside, my path of escape rumbling shut behind me. No stairs greeted me this time. It was a hallway, and at the end of it I could see blue, yellow, and black lightning arcing off the still body of a dragon. If this was a trap, I might as well have been dead where I stood.

I crept forward, slowly and carefully until the creature was in range of my magic circles. Then a voice echoed inside my head.

"Releaser of the seal, savior of my holy, earthen, and fiery brethren, come you

now for me?"

It must have been the Thunder Dragon.

"How are you able to speak while still under the curse?!"

"I was the last to be imprisoned. As it happens, my time is actually far from running short."

I examined his body and indeed noticed a lack of the usual dark blotches of miasma. The prospect of not being burned alive for once was a promising one.

"Then can I ask a few questions before I get on with it?"

"Very well. I will tell you what I know," the dragon agreed lazily. His sharp eyes shot open, and he fixed me with his gaze.

Holy *hell*, this thing was scary. It felt like I'd be too petrified to move, much less speak, if I let my guard down.

"First question: how many of you are there?" I asked.

"We are eight. Once I am free, four will remain in chains."

"Light, dark, water, and wind. Is that right?"

"Indeed. There are six great spirits in total as well. You will have need of them on the path to sagehood."

My eyes went wide. "You have knowledge about sages?"

If earning every single blessing was what it took to become a sage, then I didn't know about all that.

"I am Eternal. I have knowledge of many things."

"Then do you know how to stop the magic stones you leave behind from summoning the Wicked One?" I wasn't holding back. Solving this problem would make things so much easier. If only it were that simple.

"What you speak of is no magic stone. It is the core of the labyrinth. Tampering with it will call the dungeon's keeper."

Man, nothing could ever be easy, could it? In any case, that meant the keeper of the labyrinths was most likely the Wicked One.

“Is there nothing that can be done? Like, I don’t know, some other god we can report the bad one to?”

“Removing the core from its home will destroy the labyrinth.”

Okay, but how was I supposed to do that if I couldn’t *touch* the damn thing? And then it hit me. Someone who had been reincarnated could learn to manipulate spacetime. They could instantly transport the gem out, but it would still mean one thing: they would die. One reincarnated life, one labyrinth. But I was the only one with this knowledge, and what good would it do to share it if no one would believe me?

“Wait, but what about this place? The mine’s collapsed and I found this door outside.”

“Truly? That is strange. The Labyrinth of Wiles on the border of Luburk and Grandol yet stands.”

“We’re not in Luburk. I found the doorway at the mine between Merratoni and Grandol, in Shurule.”

“What?!” The dragon stirred, lightning sparking more furiously than before. *“Then there is no time. You must free me and fly to Grandol. To the Labyrinth of Wiles.”*

I leaped to the side as an arc struck nearby. I just wasn’t feeling very confident in my ability to survive a lightning strike today.

“Hey, watch it!” Luckily, I emerged uncharred.

“The Sworn is in danger. Hurry!” The dragon’s voice keened in my head painfully. It was frantic, like a father worried about his family.

“Some directions, please?”

“You will return to whence you came once you exit this place. No time can be wasted! You must hurry to Grandol, enter the Labyrinth of Wiles, and rescue the Sworn!”

Another round of lightning crackled off the dragon’s body.

“I said watch it! I will turn right back around and leave you here, so help me god!”

"The wheels of fate can not be stopped. Fly to her aid!"

Wheels of fate this, wheels of fate that. I'd never ordered any wheels of fate. At the very least, though, I figured I had to see what I could do. A world of demons and monsters was vastly less appealing to me than a world of scary adventurers at this point.

*"I can't promise to *succeed*, but I promise to try."*

"Face adversity and triumph."

I cast Sanctuary Circle and watched as the dragon endured the pain admirably. Lucky me, I'd gotten myself a free dragon at no peril to my very mortal life!

Gradually, the black lightning disappeared, and he cackled out loud.

"Liberator, go with my blessing and power both. Lay your staff before me."

I did, and the dragon's light flowed into it as well as the necklace I was wearing.

"Forgive us for asking this of you," he said. "And yet we must. Save the mystic. Defend the future."

"I didn't know your people had manners."

"Luciel, oh holiest of clerics, I send you with our hopes for the world. Its very balance rests in your hands," the dragon boomed. *"And so the promise is fulfilled... La...fjilu...na..."*

With one last gentle utterance of what sounded like a name, I was suddenly wracked with pain.

"High Heal!" I screamed. The moment the Thunder Dragon had fallen, a bolt of lightning had coursed through the entire room. "How am I not dead?"

After that very uncool parting gift, I collected all of the treasures around the room as consolation. Given how many items and how much money was left over, there could be no mistake that this was just like what I'd seen in any other labyrinth. I hadn't the slightest clue what was going on, but what else was new?

Once I had gathered everything, I stepped into the magic circle.

Ping!

Title Obtained: Protection of the Thunder Dragon

After the usual song and dance, the light faded and I found myself a short distance from where the doorway had been. Brod and my team hurried over as I got my bearings.

“You whoop that dragon?” Brod asked.

“Welcome back, sir,” Lionel said.

Instead of wasting time explaining, I elected to keep my promise.

“We need to get to a labyrinth in Grandol fast. Last-minute emergency,” I said. “Master, Lionel, everyone, I’ll need your help.”

I lowered my head and immediately every one of them blanched. But only for a moment.

“Well, get the damn carriage out,” I heard one of them rumble. “I thought this was an emergency.”

“Where you go, we follow, sir,” I heard another add.

I looked up. It was Brod and Lionel.

“Thank you,” I said.

Gulgar and Galba would stay behind to hold the fort, but the rest of us were off.

“We’ll be back soon,” I told them. “Promise.”

“Feel free to take care of the other labyrinths while you’re at it,” Galba teased me.

“Got some lunch for ya,” Gulgar offered. “Don’t go hungry.”

I offered them a silent thanks for their kindness, and together with my trusted companions, we departed for Grandol—the Land of Labyrinths.

A Meeting — Artificing Artisans

When it became known that Luciel would return to the Holy City, it was obvious that Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin would accompany him. Dhoran, Pola, and Lycian, however, were to stay behind at their workshops in Rockford as the Research and Development branch of Luciel and Co. At least, that was the plan until Pola and Lycian voiced their desire to travel to Shurule.

“We must do reconnaissance,” Pola claimed.

“Mister Luciel, you are in possession of numerous inspired magical creations,” Lycian said.

“And there might be even more where those came from,” Pola remarked.

“It is our duty as your R and D team to investigate this matter further. Thus, we should join you!” Lycian proclaimed.

“Also, we’re out of magic stones and there’s no Adventurer’s Guild to buy them from here,” Pola added quickly.

Luciel kicked himself for expecting their reasoning to be anything else. Foolish of him to assume that they would have simply been lonely with everyone gone. His smile was filled with self-scorn.

“As long as Dhoran’s okay with it,” he told them.

At once, the two girls whirled around to the dwarf.

“Hm,” Dhoran grunted. “Could be good for ya both. Humans aren’t so good with their hands, but those folk come up with some crazy ideas sometimes. And with Luciel, we’ll be in safe company. Aye, think I’ll tag along too.”

It was decided. But what awaited the pair of young artificers in Shurule was not what they had anticipated. In their minds, Luciel was to squire them to different stores, introducing them to various crafters. But as it turned out, the life of an S-rank healer was a busy one. Soon enough, Luciel had given Dhoran a budget, and then he was gone, leaving them to their own devices.

The girls felt betrayed, though they knew he had responsibilities. Still, neither

were blessed with the social skills their employer seemed to have, and with no other recourse, they turned to Dhoran for their extroverted needs.

“What am I gonna do with you girls?” the dwarf grumbled. Yet, behind his gruff words, he was happy to be relied upon. He accepted the role with a smile on his face.

Truth be told, Dhoran had never set foot in the Holy City before, but worst-case scenario, he could ask for directions at the Adventurer’s or Commerce Guild. How hard could playing chaperone really be?

The answer? Very hard.

The next day, the trio made their way to the city’s business quarter. What they hadn’t accounted for was how rare it was for dwarves and elves to walk the streets, and they were constantly the center of attention.

Petrified and afraid, Pola and Lycian were in no state to be calmly browsing the market’s wares. It was everything Dhoran could do to not make a scene, and he might have done just that if not for the repercussions it would have had for Luciel.

Then, their savior arrived. A young, strapping man who looked to be an adventurer clapped his hands and stole the attention for himself.

“Keep your eyes to yourselves, folks,” he announced. “They’re with Saint Weirdo, so watch it.”

Just like that, the crowd dispersed, muttering his name as they went about their business. The trio watched in awe as the man turned to them this time.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

“No harm done,” Dhoran replied. “I, er, didn’t get your name, lad.”

“Elitz. A-rank adventurer and one of the many people who owe their lives to Saint Weirdo. Also, what the rumor mill won’t tell ya is I taught the kid how to use Physical Augmentation.”

“Well, thank ya, Elitz.”

“Like I said, lots of us owe our lives to the Saint, even some of the people who

were just bothering you. A whole lotta families didn't get torn apart thanks to him. So anyone else gives you trouble, just drop his name."

"I knew the lad was big, but this is somethin' else," Dhoran murmured.

Elitz grinned. "The guy's got no idea how much he's done or how many people look up to him."

"That he does not."

They chuckled together.

"So, what're you all here for?" Elitz asked.

Dhoran told him, and Elitz became their guide for the day—for just one silver, just like the man he owed everything to. With his help, the trio toured the Holy City, hopping from shop to shop. Pola and Lycian regarded the man cautiously at first, but after some time, they warmed up to him enough to be able to ignore his presence and focus their eager minds on the various magic items on offer.

This went on for several days until finally Elitz's help was no longer necessary and the three could enjoy their trip in peace. Eventually, this would lead them to Luciel's own favorite store: Commedia.

"WELCOME TO COMMEDIA ARTIFACTS."

The trio jumped at the golem's mechanical voice. But the surprise was quickly replaced with a professional curiosity for the mechanism producing it.

"The eyes are made of magic stones," Pola deduced. "They must trigger the voice when they recognize a person. Interesting."

"Simple but very commercially viable," Lycian agreed.

"Never seen a golem used for somethin' like that," Dhoran remarked.

They proceeded to eye every product in the store with the same scrutiny.

The staff was a bit confused. They wanted to tend to the customers, but none of them had ever interacted with a dwarf or elf before. So they called for the

shop's owner, Rina. That wasn't to say she was any more experienced—she could count on one hand the number of elves or dwarves she'd met—but her customers needed her. So she composed herself and mustered her courage.

"Has something caught your eye?" she asked politely.

"Everything," the dwarf girl replied.

"What I would like to know is what manner of genius you possess to come up with these ideas," the elf girl added.

Pola and Lycian didn't even meet Rina's gaze. Their eyes were fixed on an item.

"Just the hope that the things I create can make someone's life a little bit better," Rina answered at once. Her reply was practiced because the question was hardly a new one. In this case, though, she found the repetition relieving. Their races were different, but they really weren't that *different*.

That realization, at least concerning these two girls, would not last long.

"A lot of these items are based on novel ideas," Pola mused. "But they're not made like it. They're totally polished products. Something's fishy."

"Indeed," Lycian concurred. "They're far too refined, especially given that they're commercial products. It's simply ingenious."

"Um..."

Rina was at a loss for words. She had been reincarnated from Earth, so the products she made weren't so much the fruits of her incalculable intellect as they were replicas of the standard appliances she was used to. Of course, she didn't go around telling people that. But she also didn't have the nerve to tell two clearly professional craftswomen that her creations were simply the children of her own boundless inspiration.

"Don't mind them," Dhoran interjected, much to Rina's relief. "They're artificers. I tried to tell 'em you humans are an inventive folk but here we are."

"Oh, it's okay." Rina laughed nervously. It was, in fact, not okay. *Oh god, I'm an artificer too. What do I even...*

"You wouldn't mind showin' us a few things, would ya?" he asked.

“You’re in the...crafting business?”

“Yeah? Oh, yeah, suppose so. Don’t worry, I’m not in the business o’ pilferin’ ideas that aren’t mine.”

“May I, uh, ask where you do business?”

“Yenice. Name’s Dhoran, head o’ Luciel and Co.’s Research and Development team. Those two’re with me. They specialize in magic items.”

“Yenice. I see.”

The conversation swiftly died.

Pola and Lycian had finally had their fill and were saying their goodbyes.

“You’re creative, I’ll give you that,” Pola admitted. “But your routing needs work.”

“I *might* deem you worthy of being our rival once your technical skills catch up to your inventiveness,” Lycian said haughtily.

“Ignore the twerps.” Dhoran quickly shoved the two out of the shop.

Once they were gone, Rina left the floor in the charge of one of her employees, escaped to her workshop, and promptly collapsed onto the bed.

“God...” she moaned in exhaustion.

Dwarves and elves, she thought. *Those two were cute. And that Dhoran guy was kinda grizzled and cool.* She hoped she’d see them again one day. There was just one thing on her mind. *I don’t remember a “Luciel and Co.” in Yenice when I escaped...*

The answer to this riddle would come in just a few short hours.

Meanwhile, the trio had finished their romp around Commedia.

“Human minds are scary,” Pola said.

“Agreed, but her establishment was frankly the only one worth seeing,” Lycian answered.

“Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.”

“In which case, we’ve no time for bigotry when there are inventions to be outdone!”

The girls were burning with both a respect for humanity and a newfound professional rivalry.

“Let’s go back to Rockford, grandpa,” said Pola.

“*After* we acquire some magic stones from Mister Luciel,” Lycian added.

“Hush. You know that lad ain’t stingy,” Dhoran scolded them. “Less beggin’, more gratitude. Understand?”

“Said the pot to the kettle,” his granddaughter replied with a pout.

“Well said,” Lycian agreed.

Dhoran refused to entertain them with a reaction.

And so, Luciel left them with their funds and magic stones, and their short time in Shurule came to an end. The sky was the limit for the trio and Luciel’s enterprise, and Rockford was calling their name.

Afterword

Hello again, everyone. Broccoli Lion speaking. I'd like to extend my thanks to you for reading volume seven of *The Great Cleric* as well as express my endless gratitude to all the readers and publishing staff who helped make this book a reality. I truly can't thank you all enough.

So, as of this writing—it being early November—by the time these pages reach your hands, the web version of this series will likely be nearing its conclusion. I first started writing *The Great Cleric* as a web novel all the way back in October 2015, and it's hard to believe that it's already been four years, though certain matters have made it difficult for me to post many updates these days.

Anywho, I decided to run my ideas for the ending by my editor, Mister I, and this is about how it went.

"So, I'm thinking about wrapping up the web novel."

"Didn't you say that a year ago?"

"I did, but this time I really mean it."

"Mister Broccoli, didn't you *also* say that during the very first talks for publishing volume one?"

"Maybe..."

To tell you the truth, I was originally aiming for *The Great Cleric* to be about a hundred thousand characters in length, but when publishing talks started, the ideas just kept coming, and so was born the Yenice arc. I sort of lost myself in the fun of it after that, and now here we are at a little over one *million* characters long.

You have my undying thanks, Mister I. You have your work cut out for you. On an unrelated note that absolutely no one asked for, here's how a typical conversation between us goes:

“Great, you’re wrapping up the web novel. Now, about all those red squiggles in volume seven...”

“I know, there are so many typos, but the deadline’s really creeping up.”

“Ahem, and whose fault is that?”

“Mine. I’m an escapist.”

“I know you’re not very confident about self-editing, so I have an idea. Why don’t you try using text-to-speech?”

“Text-to-speech?”

“It’ll read your writing out loud and make it easier to tell which parts need work. Apparently. I’ve never tried it.”

“Does it fix typos?”

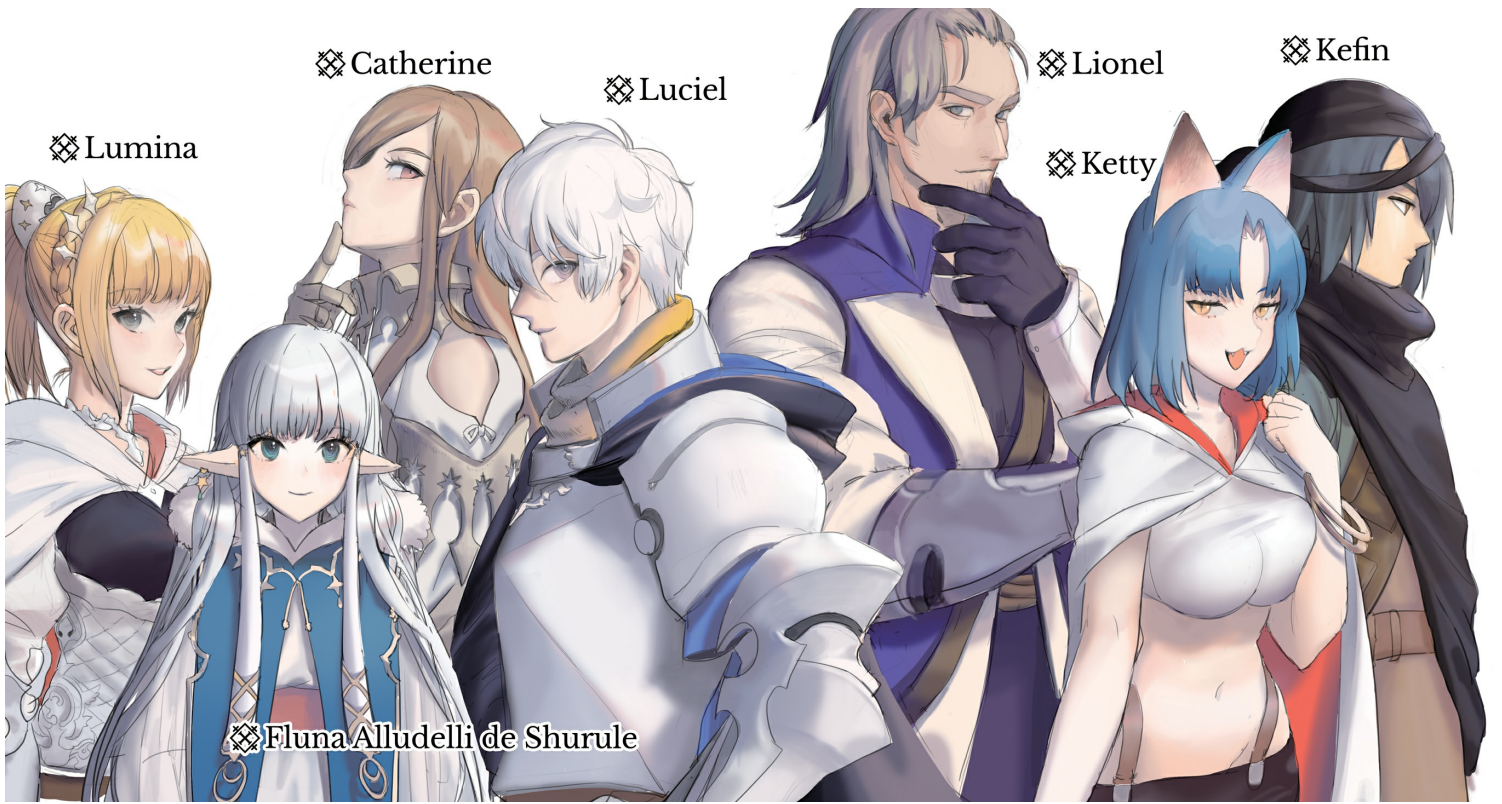
“That, Mister Broccoli, we will have to work on.”

“Yes, sir...”

And that’s about how it goes. Every single time. But the work’s been fun. By the way, in case you’re wondering, I did not end up meeting this volume’s deadline, but I *did* buy a text-to-speech program. I am now filled with whimsical hope that my proofreading will finally see improvement.

Moving forward, I will do my utmost to get that first draft in well before the deadline. And then maybe one day I’ll be able to live up to sime’s gorgeous illustrations or repay Hihiro Akikaze for the wonderful work they’ve done on the manga.

I hope that even once the web novel reaches completion, you readers will stick with me through the published version, because I’m going to keep working hard to be deserving of your support. You and everyone who makes this possible have my sincere gratitude!



✦ Lumina

✦ Catherine

✦ Luciel

✦ Lionel

✦ Kefin

✦ Ketty

✦ Fluna Alludelli de Shurule



Bonus Short Story

An Unlikely Pair

The lives of the Yenitians began to improve drastically under Galba's leadership, and his standing reputation only heightened their expectations. Day after day, the people seemed to demand more and more of their returned prodigy.

He sighed. "Anyone with half a brain knows they owe their improved lives to Luciel and his company."

"I don't think he cares for recognition. If I know him like I think I do, all he cares about is making Yenice a place where everyone can live happily."

Jord had become the guildmaster of the Yenice Healer's Guild in Luciel's absence, though he and Galba had met before that. Granted, they hadn't shared more than a few words until Galba came to him specifically seeking other opinions. After that, Jord became a valuable source of both subjective and objective information.

Galba had been sincerely impressed by his thoughtful and intelligent answers, and ever since, Jord had been something of his right-hand man, scratching those itches that Galba couldn't reach himself. The healer, too, came to rely on Galba in much the same way when he realized that Luciel's praise for the beastman's abilities had been accurate.

And so a friendship was born.

"You have a point," Galba said. "Though for someone who hates standing out, he sure has a tendency to garner attention."

"And anyone who knows Luciel knows about his company, of course, so I think anyone who cares enough already gives him due credit."

"That's the problem. There are still people who've never heard of him or the folks he travels with."

Jord had an idea of what Galba was getting at, but his world in the medical district was, admittedly, fairly limited, so he decided to confirm his suspicions. “Has there been trouble with the influx of new arrivals in the city?”

“Nothing too serious yet. We’ve had foreign merchants moving in, hoping to work with Luciel and Co. and cooperate with the locals, but not everyone has been so...cordial.”

“I see,” Jord replied. “In that case, why not ask Luciel and Co. for help directly?”

“Why them?”

“They have the resources to send relief where it’s needed—personnel, magic items, you know.”

Galba was a little confused at first, but now he understood. He had heard about the various uses of Luciel and Co.’s magic items, and he had already been toying with the idea of forming a local patrol. The dragonewts and bird-folk had their own already, but those were nothing more than power flexes. With the help of Luciel’s company and maybe the newly arrived Lineage of the White Wolf as well as the Adventurer’s Guild, something could happen.

Again, Galba found himself wishing he could make Jord his personal assistant, but he refrained from offering. He knew Jord wouldn’t accept. Then again, one didn’t need to be an assistant in order to assist.

“How comfortable would you be with me officially ceding some of my authority to you in the event that something happens to me?” Galba asked.

Jord laughed. “I doubt that’ll ever happen, but if it does, you can count on my help.”

“I appreciate that.”

As fate would have it, future events would indeed see Galba forced to leave Yenice behind, with Jord relying on the combined assets of Luciel and Co. *and* the Order of Healing. But that’s a story for another time.

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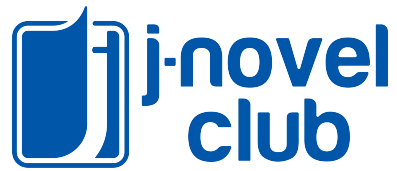
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The Great Cleric: Volume 7

by Broccoli Lion

Translated by Matthew Jackson Edited by Tess Nanavati

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